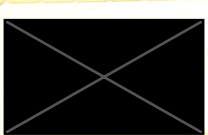


THE LIGHT OF THE GODDESS

by

JOANNE CARMINHOW



THE LIGHT OF THE GODDESS
(Lux Madriana)

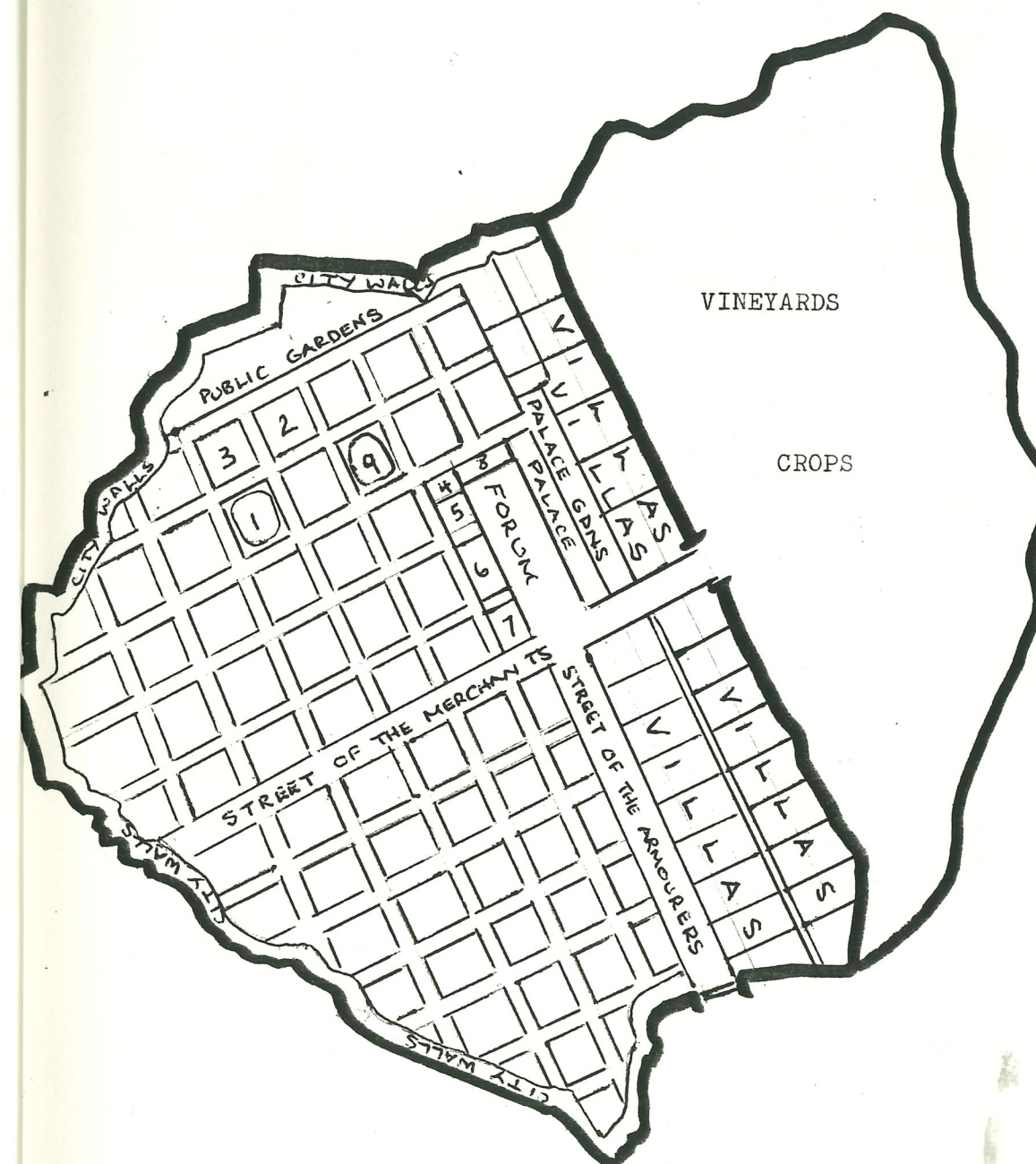
by

JOANNE CARMINHOW

26 High Street, Robertsbridge, East Sussex

1988

CITY OF THEMIS



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|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Arena | 6. Temple |
| 2. Guards Barracks | 7. Museum |
| 3. Barracks of the
Gladiatrices | 8. City Armoury |
| 4. Entrance to
Subterranea | 9. Stadium |
| 5. Hall of Records | |

INTRODUCTION

Every country has its legends of subterranean civilisations. In Germany, Adolf Hitler was a believer and sent expeditions into mountain caves to contact them! In England, from Bulwer Lytton's "The Coming Race" (Oxford U.P., 1871) to "The Lost World of Agharti" by Alec Maclellan (Souvenir Press, 1982), it is a persistent factor in folklore. In France too there are legends of underground passages, subterranean complexes and the like and it is upon this belief that the late Joanne Carminhow (1927-1983) built the story here presented.

A description of Miss Carminhow will be found in the introduction to "Unruly Daughters"; it would be fruitless therefore to repeat those details here. In our very long correspondence over the years I came to know the lady very well, and realised very early that she was a great believer in 'the possibility of the impossible' and that while she attended Mass for appearances sake, she was in fact a Pagan. That is to say, instead of worshipping a patriarchal God, she worshipped the Great Mother.

Miss Carminhow was a speleologist and on her underground adventures (sometimes with a group and sometimes alone) no doubt she found more than a little justification for her beliefs. That she believed is not in question. When I asked how she gained access to this subterranean world, her answer was always: "That secret is not mine to give" and scattered throughout her letters is the phrase: "Those I serve". This indicates that whatever the truth may be, she certainly believed that our surface world is only part of Earth's inhabited regions.

She never wavered from her statement that she was contacted by the subterraneans while she and her friends were worshipping the Earth Mother ("Saying the Office" as she termed it) in one of her manifestations. Since this fact is corroborated by three other persons, of whose sanity I am confident, I must accept the statement. They all say that the contact was not a solid, three-dimensional affair but was a 'projection' - that is to say, a bright light that formed itself into a physical being, or apparently physical. I suspect that contact on this first occasion was telepathic. So far there is nothing that cannot be rationalised. It is only when mention is made of a physical descent to a subterranean world, when lines of communication had been established, that one is bound to take refuge in disbelief.

On the other hand, the part of France where she lived (with her three friends in sapphic isolation) is famous for underground rivers and streams, a happy hunting ground for a determined speleologist; and it is here I feel is the trigger for her concept. For in France, it is not only the Grotte de Lascaux near Montignac where there are famous caves. But let us return to basics.

Robertson and Gilbertson in their "The Dark Gods" (Rider/Hutchinson, 1980) say that Bulwer Lytton was an occultist, pointing out that his famous novel deals with a totalitarian society, as indeed does Joseph O'Neill's "Land Under England" (Gollancz, 1935). Carminhow's likewise deals with a cruel, primitive even if scientifically advanced society. It is best for one's peace of mind if one considers all these books as fiction from particularly wild and fertile imaginations!

Writing of this type often portray totalitarian societies, and it is certainly true of Carminhow. Fiction, too, is often self-revelatory. Carminhow was an ardent royalist (always referring to Marie Antoinette as 'our beloved Queen') she was right-wing, yet not, surprisingly, totalitarian as it is known in our recent history. For the excesses of that period she had nothing but righteous wrath. Yet historically her

her affection was for pre-democratic times - in this regard her contemptuous description of democracy as 'the concept that ordinary people have extraordinary talents' is revelatory indeed. It is at this level that I prefer to judge her story i.e. as a peg upon which to hang her own world view; for what she believed constantly rises like bubbles on her pond.

Is there any proof? In only one particular did she provide me with any evidence that I would recognise. In her story she makes great play with a metal, vastly tougher than steel. She had in her possession (and I know this is true for I have seen it) a piece of metal, about two feet square, which she claimed came from subterranea. It was indescribably tough, yet light. At my suggestion she submitted it to a wellknown firm of French metallurgists; their report made me raise an eyebrow. They stated that the metal had withstood 10,000 degrees of heat, and that diamond drills made no impression on it. She then asked me if I was satisfied, a question to which I could only shrug in defeat.

She stated that this underground race now want the upper world to know of their existence, and that their Queen, Olympias II, has dictated this story to a scribe, in much the same way, one imagines, as Charles II dictated his story after Worcester fight to Samuel Pepys! My own belief is that Carminhow herself was Olympias II!

In esoteric circles in France this story is implicitly believed. It is now presented in English for the first time.

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I, Olympias, the second of that name, Queen of Amazonia, in mine city of Themis, far beneath your feet, greet you; and start this chronicle, sitting in open Court, gathered around me mine Royal Council, mine beloved sisters, videlicet, Drusilla (attended by her ladies Papiria, Thalia and Eunice), Selene (attended by her ladies Autonoe, Mera and Dione) and Iras (attended by her ladies Eurydice, Melita and Menippe). Likewise, sitting at mine feet are mine own ladies Lucilla (who will later figure in this narrative), Pyrene and Metella. Seated nearby is mine good secretary and friend, Petra, also of noble birth and as skilled with her quill as with her axe.

I have no wish to tell you of mine sixteen years on the surface for it is to me a bad dream, and mine bile rises even now when I think of the wasted years when time could have been more fruitfully spent among mine own people. Yet, in retrospect, it had its uses for it gave me information on surface dwellers, that I could make use of in the high station to which birth has called me. For we are much different, mine people and yourselves. For we are of the ancient race, being Neanderthal, and you are of hybrid, Cro-Magnon stock, the people who cruelly supplanted us so many centuries ago. Yet must I begin in earnest.

I had, of course, always known I was different. Now, in most cases in your world those who are different often wish fervently they were not. In my case I gloried in it, with good reason as you will see. This is not a case of sexual deviation such as you now seem to delight in. This was a case of racial abnormality.

The first dream came to me when I was five years old; or I thought it was a dream - then. As I got older I knew it was no dream, this lady in gold who sat on my bed and suspended time so that we could talk freely. Then was I puzzled why the hands of the clock moved not; now I know why, for it is of the simplest. This lady's hands were strong but graceful; and the things she told me were frightening. It would not have been so much so had I been able to confide in someone. Yet always I was told that I must never do so. Nor did I, for when I tried, or even thought of doing so, I would experience a stabbing pain. This, the lady told me with a smile, was their insurance. "For" she said, with a light laugh, "knowing what we do of surface people, if you told what you know, they would send for a doctor!".

It was about my tenth birthday when I was given the body blow that rocked me back on mine heels. My visitors changed from time to time and I had the impression that as I got older, more senior ladies came, not senior in age, but in rank. Then one came who had bejewelled hands and was most beauteous; she said her name was Corinna, a dear friend of mine mother, Queen Olympias I.

I boggled. Corinna laughed in her quiet way. "Ah, yes, child. You are not a surface dweller. But you have been told that long since, have you not? You are the eldest daughter of your mother, our Queen. I was there when you were drawn from your mother's belly. Now, tell me what they call you on the surface?".

"Katharine" I croaked.

"Your real name is Olympias, so named after your mother. Remember it. You are an Amazon maid, placed on the surface in a foolish experiment". A cloud passed over her brow. "The maid who advocated this has long since been reflecting on her folly in our satellite city under the Harz mountains. There is such a thing as being too clever".

Wonderingly I murmured: "Olympias.....I am Olympias?".

"Ay, and one day to be our Queen. And you have two younger sisters, Morpasia and Drusilla. And nay" she smiled kindly, "I am not really here, not three dimensional. I am what is known as a projection. My body is in the royal palace of Themis. One day, when you are sixteen,

someone will come to you in the body, and gather you home. Till then, be a loyal and dutiful daughter to your surrogate parents, and learn all you can of this world's ways. And remember, be silent". Then she faded quite away, the clock started to tick again, and I sank into a deep, untroubled sleep.

Knowing what I did - unbelievable though it was - the years passed very slowly. Maids blossom in their teens, and I was no exception. I was dark, with high-cheekbones and more than mine share of good looks. I guessed, from what I had seen, that all Amazon maids were so. And naturally young men were interested in me, a situation I viewed with contempt. I was cool, restrained, maybe too much so. Mine surrogate mother said I was coldly mocking, and cruel. And she sang me an English song she had heard called Barbara Allen, and said I was like the maid in the song; she was only half-serious but I understood what she was saying. Yet in mine heart I despised mine mother, and feared mine father. He was a man, the hated sex, and I had developed, in embryonic form, the Amazon ability to 'scan' (as we say) or read minds; I read his very well, and I was greatly frightened. He wanted to put his big hand under my long skirt, that was certain.

I had every reason for despising the world around me, my parents. I was not theirs, not really. And knowing mine high birth I became privately arrogant, though I let it not show. It was a strange situation and now I am by no means proud of myself. Yet, as you will see later, I had good reason to walk warily in front of mine father. For he was a man, an animal, a predator.

I readily admit mine arrogance and cruelty to you. I was to find this formed part of mine inheritance; indeed, I had to be so if I was to form part of the quarrelsome, warlike society into which I had been born; and it had been painstakingly instilled over the years. First came pride, pride in mine sex, mine race, and its superiority; and the rest followed naturally.

Of course, I was not totally Amazon yet. A good part of me was, but not all. One cannot live in another world without imbibing the standards of that world; all this, I was told, would have to be expunged. I would have to be 'processed' - ay, that was the word they used, what you now call 'programmed'. Yet I was near enough Amazon to reject the culture of the surface and espouse that of my people. For mine sense of personal honour was great, even overweening; surface maids have largely forgotten this, or abandoned it, accepting their subordinate position. Remember I was a Reyin (as we say) or Princess, as you would say.

So the years passed as I imbibed the teachings of mine subterranean mentors. But of course there was terrestrial education too. At that time village schools were dedicated not so much to education as to provide a work force who could read and write. Boys went onto farms, girls into domestic service. Mine surface mother had been a domestic servant and such I too became, although, happily for me, I worked at home. Mine 'father' was a farmer and since mine 'mother' too worked on the farm, I was left to cook and see to the house. Inwardly I rebelled, knowing mineself to be a royal child, yet there was no help for it, being ordered to play the part of a dutiful daughter. I have to admit that, if one had to live on the surface, an Auvergnat farmhouse was no bad place to be, even if one sometimes had to live in intimate sociability with animals.

I once asked one of my mentors why I had been made to suffer in this way. The lady smiled: "It was a decision of the Royal Council, much against her Majesty's wish. Yet it was speedily seen to have been an error".

When I pressed the matter, somewhat imperiously, I was told: "I cannot well say, Reyin, for as you are now you would not understand the reasons of state. Yet this may be said. The surface people are fighting a war which they claim is 'the war to end all wars'. You know it well, for you

have heard the distant guns. Alas! We know the future, and it is not the war to end all wars, for it is in the nature of man. Yet this is of no consequence to us. We know the fate that awaits the surface and 'tis not pretty, Olympias. Very shortly thereafter surface scientists will begin to meddle in matters of great danger, and which they have not the mental capacity to control. Because our society is, in many respects, in advance of surface society, it was mooted that we return to the surface and save man from the consequences of his folly. For this reason were you placed here. Then it was realised we could not because of the bacteria which affect you very little but to us would be inimical and would destroy us. For many centuries we have lived in another world, protected from all such things, and too late was it realised that our decision, born out of compassion, was a thing that could not be achieved".

"I wonder much within mineself that you bothered with fools" I returned, simmering, "for they deserve not such tenderness. Were they to know that you - we - even exist, such is the nature of men that they would not rest till they had penetrated into the earth and destroyed you".

"Ay, Olympias, this we now realise, and matters are best left as they are; yet one evil leader to come will indeed try to make contact with subterranea and will be unsuccessful, for we are an ancient people who prefer to live in the ancient way, and will have none of him. We are a combative people, much given to warlike deeds, which is anachronistic to surface dwellers, at least as far as personal combat is concerned. They prefer, as you know, mass destruction, which is not our way. Then there is the matter of religion. We worship the great Inanna, the Earth Mother, whereas on the surface patriarchal gods are worshipped. On that ground alone we would be destroyed. For the religion of the man, Christ, was greatly hostile to the ancient faiths. Your teachers will not have told you that on the surface, yet it is true".

I believed it, yet it helped me not. I swore to mineself that when I became queen no such experiments would be made. I was much angered and mine instructress, scanning mine mind, pitied me greatly. "Ay, Olympias, I would feel as you do. Yet it is good that you understand how barbarous are men, and the ways of the surface. Our memories of how it was when we walked where you walk grow dim and you know that they have learned nothing over the centuries. 'Twill be valuable to our people".

Having such knowledge was a mixed blessing. I was serious, too serious for mine age; but I had much to suppress. And much to suffer likewise, for boy children, as is their nature, felt I was placed there for their pleasure; yet when one tried to investigate mine bosoms I smote him on the sharpness of the jaw, and he lay down and slept. I was chastised for this, I, the daughter of a queen, and mine ire rose mightily. Yet from mine real mother came a message that I had done well, saying so I should treat all male predators. From this day on, knowing mine right hand to be hard, boys walked in some care when in mine presence.

Yet the threat was always there, for boy children are strong, and I, when all is said, was a maid. And the more I developed, the more did mine danger increase; just as the more a surface maid, even today, enhances her beauty by artificial aids, so much does she increase her peril. This is the curse of surface women, that her very nature becomes a traitor to her. Yet mine instructresses were consoling: "Fear not, Reyin, when you are gathered home - and the time is very nigh - you will find no men to brutalise you, merely maids whose gentle love is a joy and happiness. For mark me well, while you may have read in your books of history that in ancient days our Eastern sisters had to submit themselves to the Scythian men for the object of procreation, this has long ceased to be so with us. Now the only men in Amazonia are 'the mindless ones', the slaves, who do the base work of toiling in the fields or in the mines deep below the city. They lack brains, responding to stimuli from our machines. We make use of their big muscles, yet are much under restraint".

I was gratified to hear it, and wished it could be so on the surface; for I hated the male assumption that I was there for their gross pleasures and that such was mine destiny. That I did not accept this astonished them greatly, and was resented by them; for a man's nature is that if he sees a patch of virgin snow he cannot rest until he has left his footprint in it. A surface maid must therefore resist strongly unless she gives herself voluntarily to degradation, or submits herself legally in the contract known as marriage, which is but degradation writ large.

I was constrained one day to ask Corinna whether a slave's life was likewise extended as were those of maids; and she laughed: "Not so, Olympias. We do not trouble over this, nor is it meet we should. For the science of cybernetics has progressed so far among us that our scientists can create artificial beings which, though clothed with flesh and tissue and thus men to the eye, are in reality robots, or automatons, who respond to our needs for service. Thus when the real slaves perish, they are replaced with these new creatures, who work without tiring and without respite. Yet" she sighed, "most of us view this with mixed feelings. For our joy is making war on patriarchal tribes who also live below the surface, and garnering our slaves in that manner. For these put up resistance, which is delightful to us, trained as we are for combat. And yet one has to accept scientific advances".

"I trust the old ways are not entirely abandoned" I remarked wistfully.

"Nay, fear not, Olympias" Corinna laughed, "you will be able to live as your ancestors did, and know the excitements of combat".

I thought, perhaps cruelly, that it would be a sweet revenge indeed to have mine persecutors so rendered into robots; and she, reading mine thoughts, was understanding. "You will be a great queen of our people in due season". And I mentally preened myself, knowing she spoke no more than the truth.

Then, close to mine sixteenth birthday, I had a great joy. Mine mother herself came to me, not indeed in the body, but by projection, as always. She was a gracious lady, who smiled tenderly upon me. "You have a brilliant future, Olympias" said she. "Yet there is much to learn as a Reyin. All maids are warriors and you too must learn to fight and, if necessary, lay down your life for the people". Now had I been a surface girl, this intelligence would have affrighted me greatly; yet as it was I took it as normality, and felt mine heart swell at the thought. "Ay, indeed" mine mother said proudly, "I see you are my very daughter. Look therefore for the noble Selene to come to you very soon. Obey her in all things for while you are a Reyin, she is a great noble and much your friend".

I continued a dutiful and obedient daughter on the surface as I had often been commanded. I did mine household duties - I cleaned and cooked, even though it was far beneath me to act as a plebeian. In the evenings, when the lamps were lit, I embroidered an infinity of cushions. Yet one day, when called, I would walk out on all this with no more thought than when I fed the chickens their feed, or collected the eggs.

In the meantime, I locked mine bedroom door at night for mine 'father' was greatly addicted to strong waters, nightly visiting the drinking shop in the near village. I walked warily before him. Had I but known, other eyes, far away, were watching this with concern, and the wings of protection were beginning to fold around me. With their foreknowledge they made plans to gather me home most speedily.

I was told to prepare. This I did, with savagely repressed excitement. Mine bedroom was neat and tidy always, and I waited impatiently as day followed day. Mine mother had said Selene would come for me, and I knew she would come in great danger for herself (our world being much different from the surface) but she was a gallant maid, and a noble, and much devoted to mine interest. She was close to the Queen I knew, and much trusted. Mine mind yearned to see her greatly.

But enough of this. I must now take you to a summer's day in the summer of 1921 when I was sixteen. I had been washing the soiled dishes for my 'mother' (which was my wont, as it gave my mother time for an afternoon sleep) when I looked out of the farmhouse window towards the wood. I saw what I thought was a flash of white or silver at the edge of the wood. Then, suddenly, in my head I heard the words: "Come. The time is now". I dried mine hands, put on mine jacket, eyed myself in the mirror, pat-ted mine coiled hair and walked out of the house. And into oblivion, at least as far as surface dwellers are concerned.

As I crossed the field, I looked, for the last time, into the far distance where the ruined chateau of Murels stood on its hill. Then I entered the wood. I had always loved it, this wood. It was a favourite haunt of mine. When a child I had been taken there to pick wild berries. But now, everything seemed different. True, the bees still flitted by on their business, and an errant butterfly fanned mine face. Then mine heart skipped a beat, for sitting on a fallen tree trunk was a maid, dressed all in silver. I stared, for it was the kind of garment I had never seen before. It was tight-fitting, terminating in silver boots. Her bosoms were rich, this much I saw; but it was her face that riveted me. It was totally enclosed in a gleaming white helmet of a type which then I knew not of but which I now know to be the standard protection for us on the rare occasions we rise to the surface in the body. "Come. I have not much time. My air supply is limited". She took mine hand to her lips, then took it in her strong white hand. "I am the Guardian Selene. Follow me, Olympias".

I turned, and took one last look at the ancient farmhouse with its dormer windows. Then I followed her. She laughed melodically, though it was somewhat muffled by her protection. "Ay, the surface has its seductions, truly". We walked upwards, towards an outcrop of volcanic rock. "Where are you taking me?" I wanted to know. "Worry not, Olympias. Rely on me".

"Why, I do, Selene. This place I know well, for I have come here picking the fruits of nature".

"Ay, it is known to us. You were never out of our care" came her calm reply. "You see this, my staff?". I had scarcely taken mine eyes off it since we had met. "This is a power staff. It has many uses. At full power it can destroy, at low power....well, you will see".

We came to the rock outcrop, and to the great bush that stood there. She bent down, picking up a stick from the ground, pulled the bush aside. To mine astonishment, behind the great growth was a narrow entrance. "Hurry" my guide said, and I slipped through and she likewise. Behind us the bush fell back into place. She chuckled at mine astonishment. I never had the slightest thought that there was a cave behind the bush.

"Come, Olympias. We are wasting time. We have far to go and dangers to circumvent before you are in the haven of your mother's arms. The city is on fire to see you".

"You speak good French, Selene".

"Nay, Reyin, as yet you understand not. 'Tis difficult I know. I speak in our own ancient tongue. My words automatically translate for you. When your mind has been processed you will speak the tongue of Amazonia".

"How may this be, Selene?".

"Here is a marvel to you, ay? Yet 'tis no magic. When your brain has been processed you will be able to do many things you cannot yet do. I am no maid of science but a warrior; but this I may say. The brains of surface dwellers are similar to our own, yet we marvel that you use but a small part of it. A brain is a very sophisticated instrument. Any maid can read another maid's mind - what we call scanning. Any maid can teleport - that is, make objects subservient to our will. We can also pass through solid objects. Our bodies are reduced.....but nay, you

would not understand. It is a complicated process even for us, and one our scientists only bent to their will a mere eighty years ago. I came by this means, but for you it would be too difficult, and thus we must travel in the body. And now, Reyin, we must do something about those strange garments you wear". I could sense her amusement. "All has been thought on. On this shelf I left garments for you such as mine. But as I wear silver, these are gold".

"Why gold, Selene?"

"Because of your rank. Now, haste and don them, for I am too close to the surface for mine health's sake".

The garments were smooth to the touch, almost metallic; and they were cold. I shivered as I let my surface garments drop to the floor. Yet it was very strange but as soon as these seemingly cold and stiff garments came into contact with the warmth of mine body they became supple, and soft and clinging and likewise warm. I pulled on the boots and was quite enchanted; there was a hooded cloak too and a belt with a dagger.

"This is standard dress among us?"

"Standard, ay, for the nobility. Now, come, Olympias. Your favour now, Reyin, we must on. Your body can combat surface bacteria, I cannot. I had but one hour and time passes. So yet again I say, come".

So we went; yet as we did so I remarked: "I shall like life in Amazonia?"

"Assuredly. For this were you born. You will be a warrior".

"I, a warrior!". I laughed at her back. "Surface maids are timid".

"You are not a surface maid. Not really. And even were you timid, which you are not, it would be because you are as yet untrained. The untrained mind is an indisciplined mind. Courage is in everyone. You are destined to lead our people. To an Amazon maid, fear is unthinkable. Fear is an attitude of mind. You will see. You will be a great warrior. All our soothsayers say so. They are never wrong".

Suddenly we came to a halt, our way blocked by a rock face. She laughed: "This is a problem for you, Reyin".

"Ay, but not for you, Selene".

"Nay, not for me". She placed her staff against the rock and it vanished. Mine eyes bulged at the wonder of it. "It stands not to my credit. 'Tis the power staff".

She took mine hand again; her hand was larger than mine, though smooth and white as befits a maid. I mentioned her strength, and she spoke in quiet pride. "Ay, I am well enough. So will you be. Indeed, you will not be able to help yourself. We are a warrior race". She glanced sideways with amused disparagement. "Surface women are like sticks. We, you will find, are all athletes".

While she spoke we started to float, though I was not immediately aware of it. When I was I mentioned mine amaze. "'Tis easy, Reyin" I was assured, "all this will be within your capacity when the knowledge in your brain has been unlocked. Yet peace for a while, for carrying two drains me somewhat. I have to concentrate greatly".

So I was silent for a while, thinking about the power staff. I now know it takes much practice to wield effectively, for it has varying power. And she, landing on a ledge answered mine thoughts which she had read without mine giving voice to them. "Ay, too much power would bring the rock down on our heads, something akin to too large an explosive charge in the upper world. It can destroy living tissue and bone, it can stun; and as you have seen, it can remove rock, if used with care, expending just enough power. There is nothing like it on the surface yet, though I understand there will be in about a hundred years".

Another thing which amazed me was the strange green luminescence. "Ay, 'tis general in subterranea" I was told, "it encourages growth in crops and, together with our greatly advanced medicine, increases our longevity to twice that known in the upper world. There you say, I think, three score years and ten as being your lifespan; in subterranea you might as well say six score years and twenty. And many exceed that without noticeable diminution in our maidenly charms. Astonishing, is it not?". It was, and I only half believed. Then.

Then came a chasm, the bottom of which I could not see. I felt trepidation; yet we floated over it easily enough. And apart from telling me not to look down and to keep mine eyes fixed fast on the opposite ledge, mine guide evinced no concern. We then plunged into a tunnel system of bewildering complexity; the passageways led ever downward. It also was getting colder, despite my suit. "Worry not" Selene said, "'twill get warmer anon", as indeed it did.

Then, quite suddenly the passage ended in a spiral staircase, and she bade me take care. "This goes down an infinite way and ask me not who built it for no maid knows. Yet the steps are worn". When we were some way down and I was getting giddy, she stopped and sat, bidding me do likewise. "Reyin" she said seriously, "I must now speak to you of dangers we must encounter. I would spare you but I may not. For the sight of what you are to see is enough to scarify us, did we not know". And she spoke to me in short, pithy sentences of the monsters, the decadent, mutated descendants of what must have been, I suppose, a life form such as gorillas on the surface, but much taller and more frightful to the eye. "They are witless for the most part, slobbering monstrosities. Yet vicious, and carnivores; as the surface people say, cannibals. The danger is very real for to them we represent a meal of succulent flesh". I am not sure whether what I felt was fear or excitement; a little of both perhaps. "And their stench is terrible". She removed her helmet and placed it on mine head, locking it behind. "'Twill protect you from the smell somewhat. For they live in a great cavern where their body refuse lies thick on the ground. Thus may you thank Inanna for your boots".

"We have to pass through them?"

"Ay, that we do. But fear not, dear Reyin. With my power staff will I destroy them. And for perhaps for the last time in your life you must obey me. When I say run, you must run, and look not back. 'Tis understood?"

"Ay, 'tis understood. Are you not the Guardian Selene? Mine brave warrior?"

She took mine hand and squeezed. "Ay, but mark me. You have seen nothing like this on the surface. Trained in valour as I am, this is something that chills even me. We shall soon reach the foot of these steps. A long passage will stretch before us. At its corner it enters into a large chamber, very high, like a cliff; and in these cliffs are caves where the creatures live. Long before we come to the cavern there will be a foul smell. Sealed as you are, it will not penetrate to you too much. You will run first, straight through to where the track rises, and keep running. Look not back. Very quickly must you run, for one blow from their great paws could tear your arm from its socket. Fear not for me. I will blast everything in sight and join you when I may. Say you understand, and will obey".

"I will obey. And it seems to me I hear noise. And sealed as I am, I smell foulness".

"Like enough. Let us therefore pray to Inanna and then face what we must with a high heart". This done, she took a grip on her power staff: "Now, follow me, yet softly".

I am hard put to it to describe what I saw when I peered around that corner. I was not prepared in any way for the sight that met mine eyes. Selene spoke true, yet until you see it yourself reality is not present. I felt sick and briefly closed mine eyes against the sight. The half rent carcass was nothing, the excreta that covered the chamber floor was nothing. But the creatures I can barely describe. They were huge and appeared not to have necks, their heads issuing straight out their shoulders. Long, dark hair covered them except for the leather-like chests, which they beat. But it was the genitals that swelled even as they saw us. Or smelled us, for I take it that, to them, our odour is distinctive. They snuffled, turned in our direction, saw us and leapt up and down, emitting roars that echoed in the chamber roof. But it was the hideous, slobbering faces, and the great size of the genitals that were of nightmarish horror. Now or never it was and Selene cried sharply: "Run!". I had to force myself, but I did; I splashed through the filth, she behind me. As she ran she fired, once, twice. There were two beams of blue light, thin but deadly. Two of the monsters glowed briefly, then vanished. I did not look back until I was at the top of the rise.

Selene stood crouched, facing her enemies. I heard her laugh, a short, hard laugh and swing her staff all through a semi-circle. Some of the monsters went down, screeching as the beam struck them. Then the rest fled, clambering up the walls. Selene joined me, all warrior, without a trace of pity on her high-cheekboned face. She was slightly flushed, her eyes with the light of battle in them.

"What....are.....they?" I faltered.

"I have told you. Mutants". Her voice was bleak, dismissive. Yet she forced a smile, softening her tone. "Thank Inanna that we have won through without scathe". She looked me up and down anxiously. "You were not touched by them?".

"Not I".

"'Tis well. For I tell you true. They can wrench a maid's arm from its socket in the twinkling of an eye". I believed her. "Make haste now, Reyin. I hid our transporter vehicle among these rocks. It would be a sin to miscarry now".

To mine eyes the vehicle was strange. It seemed to be made of a gleaming white material, with a transparent dome. In shape it was an elongated egg. She tapped it with her hand and the roof opened immediately. She pushed me unceremoniously in, looking over her shoulder, then slid in after me. Then the vehicle started to move without her appearing to touch anything, gathering speed as it went. She relaxed. "We are safe now, Reyin".

"How long before we see the city?" I cried eagerly.

"Not long. You will see a bright glow and that will be Themis".

We travelled for, I suppose, ten earth minutes or so at a fair speed and I said: "Surely, dear Selene, we have travelled many earth miles this day".

"That is so. That cavern lies mostly under the city of Paris and we strongly suspect, although we cannot be certain, that the beasts have found a way upwards, perhaps into the great sewer system of that city, and that they pluck earth women from the streets. For their appetite for female flesh is insatiable; also for female blood". She shuddered. "It would have gone ill with us.....". She reached out her hand and covered mine comfortingly. "Yet what we maids fear mostly are their great genitals. The thought near drives us insane, Reyin. Yet sometimes, as we are Amazon and therefore valorous, we don full armour and, for sport, venture beyond our gates and do battle with such as we find. 'Tis an exciting diversion although we venture not beyond our lights. For we

fear their strength greatly. I have seen an armoured maid thrown into the air by one of those creatures".

"Ah! Valour for valour's sake!".

"Most like". Selene laughed gently, and, as I could hear, proudly. "And you will find it in your proud heart to so venture your person, when trained. Yet being the eldest daughter of the royal house the Queen will much oppose it. Yet 'twould be exciting indeed and I would venture this my body in such a cause. Yet did your surface dwellers but know what was beneath their feet, what would they say, think you?".

"I think a few of them suspect".

"Ah yes, your speculative writers". Selene smiled sideways at me. "We know of them; and they are nearer the truth than they know".

"As I have always thought".

"Ay, but your blood told you much of the truth. But see, there is the glow of our city". And there indeed was a glow that grew ever stronger as we approached, and mine astonishment was profound, for there, high on crags, was a heavily fortified city with thick stone walls, much after the fashion of Roman fortifications, along which, as I could plainly see, gleaming figures did patrol. Selene smiled in quiet pride. "Welcome to the city of Themis, Reyin. Your home. How think you of it? I have heard it said that it is the most impressive sight in subterranea".

I was awed by it and whispered: "I think that is an understatement, Selene. 'Tis magnificent. And that light! 'Tis strong".

"Ay, 'tis strong. The thing you know as electricity was known about in ancient time in a primitive way. Our scientists use several sources, such as water power and other things I cannot well explain. We call it 'the light that never dies' which it has never done in my lifetime at least".

She moved her right foot and the craft moved upwards. Seeing mine look of astonishment, she laughed again. "'Tis no magic, Olympias. 'Tis so ordered". She meant of course that the craft was programmed but the word was not in currency then, at least not on the surface.

At our approach the great gates opened and the craft drifted through. It was then I saw mine first Amazon warrior in her silver armour. She bowed to us lowly, an obeisance which I acknowledged with a smile and Selene with a graceful movement of her hand. "Forget not" she whispered, "you are a Reyin and I a great noble. Such obeisance is proper to our station. Now, your first sight of your city". It was astonishing, a great culture shock. Selene understood well.

"'Tis like stepping back into your history books, is it not? As if Rome has come to life again. Yet are we smaller than Rome, confined by the limitations of the site, yet with all facilities necessary. You will find an arena, a stadium, a museum, great buildings, a hospital, great villas and of course the Royal Palace, your home. Likewise a university, where you will find our sciences much ahead of your own. But then" she added kindly, "we have had the benefit of the ancient learning which your surface people had the bad taste to destroy".

Selene brought the craft to a halt in a great square, which I knew to be the Forum. All around it rose stately, pillared buildings. As I sat open-mouthed Selene pointed them out to me. The fact is, I failed entirely to concentrate, faced with these wonders. "There is our Temple, where we worship the great Inanna. There is the Senate, where the city elders do meet. And you see those broad steps leading upwards, and the great long building covering the length of the Forum? That is the royal palace, your home. And this our Forum, the public place, where the merchants sell their wares; they likewise have shops in the streets leading off. But you and I have business at our hospital".

"You too, Selene?"

"Ay, I too, for I have ventured my poor body into the upper world. And we must make sure I have brought no ills back with me. These clothes must be incinerated, more's the pity and we treated. And it is more than safe for you to remove the helmet now".

She aided me and for the first time I was able to closely see what manner of maid Selene was, in the bright light of the city. She was comely in the extreme, with merry eyes, that could be hard as diamonds when facing combat, or grave when giving a legal judgement, but when relaxed or when the better (or worse) for wine had imps of devilment in them. And she too was regarding me with some approval, which pleased me much. To cloak mine pleasure at her touch, I asked where the people were.

"Why, they sleep at this hour, Reyin. It was so ordered by the Queen. For they may not see you until you have been cleansed of surface.....er.....impurities. You understand?"

Naturally I understood. "That was why the warrior maid came not close?"

"Even so. Now, when you meet the doctors, know that they too are noble. They will greet you, as is customary among our caste, by smiting the left breast with the clenched right hand. Always be gracious, Olympias. 'Tis both expected and wise. For the nobles are the props of the throne". I was one day to know just how wise her words were. "Now we go to the hospital where the chiefest of our learned ones await you. The chief surgeon is Egeria, the Royal physician, and therefore your own. Not only will she superintend your cleansing, but you must likewise be prepared for your new life. All those quaint upper world conceits must be removed from you. 'Tis entirely painless".

Selene turned the craft, which glided and stopped outside a large building with a dome. At the stopping of the craft, they came down the steps to meet us, and saluted even as Selene had said - these white robed maids. It was mine first sight of 'the White Amazons', or 'the Sisters of Compassion' as they were known. I acknowledged their salute as I had been taught. Egeria said: "Reyin, we have long awaited you. Will it please you to enter?"

Now, some description of the treatment would not come amiss. I was taken to a large chamber and here I was asked to disrobe, during which Selene stood by. The learned ones were masked, so I saw only their eyes, which were kind and respectful. Once naked I was covered with a cool, odourless liquid, but which seemed to be oily in composition. I was, I confess, slightly embarrassed; they must have read mine mind for the chief one said: "Reyin, you are a very beautiful maid, and there is no cause for embarrassment. We are all maids in Themis remember. Now must you sleep". And she placed her hand on my forehead and I felt the world slipping away, and I plunged into an inky pit.

What happened while I was unconscious I know not but I seem to remember awakening briefly while I was being cleansed of the oily substance. And I seem to remember also being laid on a marble table with a helmet, similar to that I had worn when coming through the cavern; yet from this it seemed that wires emerged, and above mine head an instrument moved from side to side under the guidance of a white robed figure. And high up, nigh unto the ceiling, I espied a screen upon which images appeared, and at these the operators of the machine constantly looked. There seemed to be a light buzzing in mine ears, by no means unpleasant; yet I could not seem to keep mine eyes open and I drifted off into sleep again.

When I finally awoke I was a-bed, and over me was a transparent bubble. Looking up I beheld a smiling Selene in what I now know to be a stola, a white, loose-fitting robe gathered in at the waist by a black belt, from which hung a jewelled dagger. On her head was a banded headress that made her look very fine for it was white and her hair was dark.

"Your lady mother, the Queen, is on fire to speak with you. Then when the time is ripe there will be a great banquet and the Court will swear fealty to you. Before that you will be presented to the people. This is only the start of your brilliant future. You will have great power under the Queen. And you will have to learn our warlike skills. You are heir to the throne and will be a great warrior. You will have to lead us in war".

I was suddenly aware that as she spoke I knew her words before she uttered them. I could scan her brain! And I said: "I think more has happened to me than being cleansed of bacteria, Selene. I seem able to do strange things".

She laughed. "But of a surety, Reyin.....".

"Pray call me Olympias".

She bowed her pleasure. "Your brain has been processed, to fit you for your new life. It was quite painless, was it not? Yet part of your surface knowledge has been left. It will be useful to us in Council. And you have other powers which in other times you would have held to be magical". Her cheeks dimpled and her eyes danced. "Let us make an experiment. Here am I, and my throat is dry from all this talking, and you have been so inhospitable as not to offer me wine. Bid that goblet come to me". And I concentrated and it did so, not by words but by the power of mine mind. She laughed at mine wonderment. "Teleportation is simple to a mind trained. So are you a true Amazon maid".

This pleased me mightily, and she coming close, I reached up and kissed her. And since a maid receives her pleasure through her skin, I was soon sighing for her touch. Then comes a white robed nursing sister, who reproved us, yet not without a twinkle in her eye. Selene said I pouted prettily but we desisted, for mine whole being had started to sing.

Later, when all my tests had been completed, and I pronounced free from bacteria, the Queen came and sat with me, snatching a brief time from her many duties. "Dearest child, beloved daughter, 'tis my happiness to see you here. When I looked on your sufferings at the hands of the surface dwellers, it was as an axe blow; yet it was good that you knew the cruel hearts of men. Yet I saw your tears and grieved. Thus did I send the Guardian Selene to you. She is one of my bravest warriors and much devoted to you". Her lips twitched. "Now she tells me that there are between you feelings intimate, though as yet embryonic. This pleases me, daughter, for she is a great noble and it is most meet that you should love. Yet my youngest daughter, your sister Drusilla, came and looked upon you often while you slept, and was much heated thereby. Yet this puzzles me greatly, for hitherto Drusilla has been more exercised by gallant deeds in the arena. Yet her feelings for you please me well, for she is most worthy of your bed". Then she became silent for a space. "Yet you have another sister, Morpasia, our finest warrior, terrible in battle. Yet she loves you not, her appetite for my crown being great. It may be that when I am gone she will be a thorn in your dear flesh; it may be that you will have to slay her. Drusilla and the Council think it so, and I also, regretfully. It saddens me that two sisters may have to contend for the crown. Yet you are the firstborn, undoubted queen. I made your sister governor of our satellite city, many days march away, for the quiet of my people; for much complaint was made of her, and her cruelties when I and Drusilla were away on a raid against the patriarchal tribes. I failed with Morpasia and I know not why. Yet you and Drusilla bring balm to a mother's heart". With that, and claiming the necessities of state, she departed. And Selene, when she next came, confirmed all she said, as did Drusilla as you will see.

Drusilla was, and is, a most beauteous maid, and I verily believe we were both smitten with love on sight. Certainly it was so for me; for

even as I lay there, looking up at her, mine privy parts leapt and I knew we were destined for each other. And when I mentioned Morpasia to her, a cloud darkened her sweet face.

"Ay" she murmured, "the Queen did well to warn you. For she has an evil nature, has Morpasia. Yet I will stand with you, as will Selene, and all of Themis. Yet it will often happen that natures such as Morpasia's strikes a chord in breasts other than her own. There is one Counsellor, named Europyte, who is much her creature. It may be that one day, in the distant future, blood will have to be spilt; for Morpasia's enmity for you is great, as you stand between her and what she desires. Yet our mother has many more years and thus is it of no immediate consequence lest the Queen should fall in combat, which is unlikely, her armour being so fine. And we are at peace, so the danger is not great". She laughed suddenly: "Yet let us speak of sweeter things, maidenly things, for I see you and I will be more than loving sisters".

Thus did I come to Themis, to mine inheritance, and was pitched quickly into the destiny which fate had in store for me. Yet, in all this, was Drusilla mine good right arm; and more than that, mine bedfellow.

After I had been declared free from all surface contaminations, and had been received back into the bosom of mine family, I had to be shown to the people, who received me with acclamation.

Thereafter one of the first things I did was to walk around the Forum, courting popularity with the people. I did not go alone of course. No Reyin did, and certainly not the future Queen. Drusilla and Selene accompanied me, as well as a strong contingent of guards. I was thus very early pitchforked into the life of Themis. And believe me, mine days were full of wonder and excitement.

At first, the sight of the gold-clad Reyin, in her rustling magnificence, provoked an orgy of obeisance, which though for a while it fed mine appetite for omnipotence, came to be boring, because one can easily be satiated with adulation. And a Reyin, in our society, is adored, and rightly so, for we spell continuity, protection, leadership and justice. It is generally reckoned by the people that as long as the Queen is in her Palace, supported and sustained by her daughters, Amazonia cannot fall; and since our Queenship is of such hoary antiquity, they have good reasons for so believing. Rank certainly has great privileges - the privilege of life and death as they say - but there is another side to the coin. The people know well that no Queen or Reyin would baulk at laying down their lives for the people; indeed, it is considered a cheap payment to ensure the permanence of Amazonia and the happiness of the people.

As in all monarchies, the Crown is the fount of all honour and justice. On the surface monarchy has been diminished, and refuge been taken in democracy - the concept that believes that ordinary people have extraordinary talents. This is not our way. The Queen is head of all and from her, by delegation to her daughters, judgements are made. Thus, as I walked among the people, I was frequently asked to make judgements on anything from a property or merchandise dispute, and my decision was binding. My hand was frequently kissed in my passage through the Forum, and Drusilla was greatly amused by mine embarrassment. Yet I grew used to it, coming to regard it as my due, which indeed it was.

As will be noted, all maids, except the lowly plebeians, go armed. Each maid carries a dagger. My own was jewelled but each maid, according to her circumstances, provided as fine a weapon as she could. It was a matter of pride to do so, for it proclaimed one's caste - just as, on the surface, in previous times, the wearing of a rapier proclaimed one a gentleman. I have to admit that we are a quarrelsome people. Raised as we are, this is understandable. Our personal honour is precious to us, so that we are prepared to die in its cause. Perhaps our pride is too great; this is for you to judge. I merely state things as they are.

Morpasia - the wicked Morpasia as the people call her - was prone to swagger about the Forum, she and her entourage, provoking quarrels; and while the people overlook much in a Reyin, her peccadilloes, say, Morpasia's deeds were heinous, and for these was she banished. When I came to Themis she had gone, yet I soon became aware of the essential nature of our race, even on this first day in the Forum.

Blood-letting is not an everyday occurrence, but, I admit, it is not infrequent. Often the quarrel is foolish, as on this occasion; it was a dispute over merchandise, a roll of cloth. In another place, in another culture, I might have sought to prevent what now happened. But I had been well schooled, and I had Amazon blood, hot and combative. Drusilla whispered in mine ear: "There is nothing you can do, sister. It has to be this way". Selene murmured: "True, Reyin. Which one will fall, think you?". When each maid is trained to kill, who can say? In the twinkling of an eye, daggers were drawn, and two maids circled each other on sandalled feet, looking for an opening. Their eyes were hot and angry, their teeth bared in hate. To us there is no finer sight than two maids in combat. These two looked very fine in their brightly

coloured dresses, and were lithe and strong, obvious subjects for admiration. Mine heart started to beat quicker in excitement; nor was I alone in this. All activity in the Forum stopped, and the people gathered round to watch, glee on each face. Silence fell, with only the sound of sandals on paving stones punctuating it. Then the inevitable happened.

There was a flurry of blows, so quick that all we were conscious of was a colourful blur. There was a scream, and one of the contestants reeled back, clutching her middle. I saw blood bubbling through her fingers, nor was it a trickle, but a flood. Her knees sagged, the dark head fell back, her mouth open in a soundless scream of agony. Then she crumpled and was dead before she hit the ground. A corporate sigh ran through the people, and they turned away to return to the business of the market.

"Phoh! So soon over?" Selene whispered.

I watched the maid's heavily stained dress and shrugged; then turned to the victor, congratulating her with a smile. She bowed before bending and wiping her weapon on her enemy's dress. "She was a trouble-maker, Reyin" she explained, rising. "Had it not been I, 'twould have been some other maid". I admired her coolness, and smiled.

"Then was it well done, maid" Drusilla remarked, as we turned away.

Nobody seemed anxious to remove the body, so I ordered two guards to drag the corpse to the wall of the Forum, which they did. What happened to the body I know not, but I do remember that when we returned that way, it still lay where it had been.

Selene glanced at it, musing: "A goodly thrust, that, of a skill quite diabolical".

I glanced sideways at her. "I handled it well?".

"Supremely well. As a Reyin. Yet I feared me, briefly, that you would try to stop the combat".

"I?". I stared at her astounded, as if I had been raised in Themis and sudden death a commonplace. "I, Olympias? Stop an honourable fight between two maids? Art mad, dear Selene? I dwell not on the surface now. There one is taught that you are your sister's keeper. I know better. Our life is in our own hands, the strength of our wrist. Is't not so, dearest Guardian?".

Drusilla laughed softly. "It is so, Reyin. You are a true maid of Amazonia. Yet Selene marvels that you so soon adopt our ways, as do I. You see, Olympias, we feared that surface concepts would have entered so deep into your consciousness that you would be incapable of relinquishing them. We are happy that it is not so".

"In truth" Selene nodded. "Life would have been mighty difficult, had you not been as you are. Yet our scientists said that all would be well, and it is so. Their techniques of conversion appear mighty effective".

"Yet we should not wonder, it seems to me" Drusilla reflected, "for we went to great pains to nullify surface teachings in our lessons by projection, for we are greatly skilled in manipulating the minds of surface people. Yet you were one of us always, simply an exile against your will. It is in your royal blood. So we need not marvel too much".

"Nay, indeed, Drusilla" Selene responded, gravely. "You are in the right of it, as always. Blood counts for much".

"Blood counts for all". As Drusilla said it we entered the Palace and I dismissed the guards, who saluted and departed. We went straight to the Queen, for it was near the hour for eating the midday meal and I had much to tell her of what I had seen that day. And when Drusilla told her how well I had handled the occasion, she kissed me tenderly, and praised me much, whereat - so Drusilla avers - I turned rose colour with joy.

Everything was new to me and I was terribly curious about everything. Drusilla was not much of a scholar, though she fought and made love well; while, like all maids, she respected learning, I thought I could detect a little impatience when I would not accept that a thing was so, and insisted on knowing why it was so. I always knew where to find Drusilla, which is to say, either in the Royal Armoury, or overseeing the scribes in the Hall of Records. One day I wandered into the Chancery and saw its young Head, by name Nerissa, on her raised dais, overseeing her staff. Nerissa would one day have a large part in mine life, but more of that anon. I did, however, note her abundant charms, and I was very aware of my susceptibility in this regard. Head of Chancery was a hereditary post, which Nerissa had inherited from her mother. She was not of the high nobility then, but of the lesser; yet when I became Queen (as you will later see) I was to raise her up high for her signal services to the state, and to me personally. But on this day I wandered out of the Chancery, after acknowledging her obeisance.

In the matter of scholarship, I usually went to Selene, with whom (as well as with Drusilla) I was intimate. Her face would light up when she saw me and I knew she would be mine to command always. It pleased me, for in these early days I was mighty proud of mine rank, and arrogant to boot. But I let not Selene see it, for I loved her dearly, and had no wish to lose my carnal access to her. When, on this day, she heard mine question, she took me to the head of our highest college, and there left me in the capable hands of the Chief Teacher, a maid in her grey hairs, and grave of mien. Courteously and deferentially she asked in what way she could aid me. I asked about the valley, and whether the roof far above our heads was safe. She smiled in that condescending and slightly superior way common to all teachers (I had noted it on the surface also): "That is, Reyin, if I may be permitted, a surface world question. Our valley is, I admit, a geological anomaly. Yet there are many such, as you will find when you go on your first raid. The earth is not solid rock right through to the central red hot core. You may read in the chronicles that as it is now it was when our distant ancestors came here; that is, when the world above was largely covered with ice. Our opinion is that the valley was caused by the cataclysm that destroyed Atlantis, for as you will see, the valley is rock strewn. Beyond our light, where we dare not go without complete armour and laser guns, the ground sinks away deeply. I have never been; but in what the surface people call the eighteenth century an expedition was made. And according to the Report, which you may read in the Hall of Records, it seems that where the valley ends in a great rock wall, there is a fissure of a depth that could not be determined; yet a rock dropped into it was not heard to strike the bottom until one with moderate slowness might tell twenty".

"So deep?".

"So deep, Reyin. And 'tis pitch black there. The expedition had to move with great care".

"I doubt not that. And the rock above us?" I persisted.

"It has not moved within recorded memory. There was a time, as you know, when it was foolishly mooted that we return to the surface". Mine face must have darkened, for she said hastily: "Ay, the story is known to you. Yet because foretelling the future accurately is within our competence, we knew that the upper world would soon discover something that would put almost limitless power in their hands. Thus, our engineers moved to support the rock above us with a strong protection that covers the entire city. Thus are we safe; and when the fools above eventually construct a frightful weapon, it will be used in another part of our cantel, praise be to Inanna".(*)

(*) Cantel = planet.

"And the water supply?"

She smiled. "You have doubtless seen the ancient aqueduct. This carries water that percolates through from the other world" - she pointed upwards to the surface - "from underground springs and streams. It is collected in chambers cut into the rock, and after treatment for possible impurities, it is drawn up to supply baths, and to irrigate our vineyards and crops tended by 'the mindless ones'".

"They are the slaves?"

"Even so, Reyin".

So much for that. On another day I prevailed upon Selene to escort me round the museum. "I warn you, Olympias" she remarked humorously, "you will see much to astonish you. For you will see much that the surface world holds to be myths. For instance, know you what that may be? Nay, go not so close that you may read the description". It looked like a helmet, much decayed, and I said so. "You say true, Olympias. Now, read and be astonished". I read and boggled. Selene laughed at mine amaze. "Ay, truly it is a Gorgon helmet. See you now, where the snakes are carved around it? This is the source of the upper world's legend. It may even be Medusa's helmet for all we know; I can think of no other reason why it was kept. 'Tis said her gaze could turn a man to stone. I know not of that; what I do know is that it did not affect us for she was smote to the ground by the Reyin Alethea. Yet 'tis said she had a hatred of men, so it may be the story arose from that".

"Ay, yet how came we to fight them?"

"Why, we had an alliance with the Atlanteans who were much plagued by this tribe, and they invoked our aid. We gladly went but it was a terrible battle; for as I read in the chronicle, our first three ranks of maids were laid waste before we could even get their measure. Then, as Alethea and Medusa could not prevail against each other, the battle was broken off while both sides rested; then the battle was rejoined and after a ferocious battle Alethea slew Medusa and took her head, and the Gorgons fled".

At the sight of the helmet and the other marvels I was shown, I thought much, and expressed wonderment, whereat Selene nodded. "You see, Olympias, the surface world lost so much during the Dark Ages and are laboriously re-discovering matter that was commonly known in ancient times and which is still known to us. Yet we marvel greatly that men will not admit the existence of this knowledge, which argues much stupidity and ignorance".

"Then are we much favoured?"

"Even so. Forget not that we are inheritors and custodians of the ancient knowledge. We descend from the Libyans of old, and through them to the Egyptians. You will have heard that the Pharaoh Ptolemy I founded the great library of Alexandria, which was later destroyed. Within it was enshrined knowledge that was common to all people, and is still known to us. Thus, in medicine, science, metallurgy and other skills we are much advanced. Yet the surface people believe it not, and never will, alas! They have intellectual arrogance. When they discover something tending to indicate the existence of such advanced knowledge in early times, they shut the evidence away in the cellars of their museums rather than adjust their beliefs. It is pathetic indeed. Yet forget we them and think rather of this evening, when, as I understand, you represent the Queen at the arena".

"Indeed, 'tis the first time. I look forward to it greatly".

"As you should. For you will see many notable feats of arms performed and some brave maids go to their death in combat. The surface world has no spectacle, no excitement to set beside it. I envy you your first sight of our corps of gladiatrices".

The gladiatrices are of two kinds - volunteers, ensnared by the excitements of combat, and wrong-doers who, after due process of law, elect this punishment in preference to exile in the Satellite City, which is in reality a penal colony. It is not a city in either our or your sense; it is little more than a series of galleries with small cells, each with its hard bed and a door that is locked at night. The day is spent in mines below this complex, where the earth is made to yield up ores for transportation to Themis. The work is hard but necessary, both economically and for law enforcement; but it is understandable that wrong-doers (mostly of plebeian stock) would prefer death in the arena to a slow death in the mines, for at least when you are slain in the arena it is quick.

There is an inducement for plebeians who volunteer to enter the School of Gladiatrices. After rigorous training, fifteen locked bands are placed around the left arm. After each victory in the arena, one band is removed; and if a gladiatrice survives her fifteenth combat and the last ring is removed, she is automatically advanced to the lowest rank of maids entitled to bear arms and may pursue any trade she wishes. Naturally, many elect to become a warrior, and join what you would call our army, guarding the walls of Themis. Once there the maid may advance herself through valour on raids and worthiness to command other maids up to the number of one hundred, much the same as a centurion of Rome, with which you will be familiar. In such advancement one takes one's family and since any warrior may have servants, the risks may be seen to be well worthwhile for a plebeian maid. (One may remark in parenthesis that the Royal Guards are recruited from the cream of these maids; their officers are all noble, usually younger daughters of the great families).

Another useful source of gladiatrices are the women we capture during our raids on primitive tribes in other parts of subterranea. These make fine fighters for they are by nature wild, savage and, by our standards, depraved, and once trained they are ferocious fighters with a bloodlust that excites we, the spectators. By these various means the corps of gladiatrices is maintained at about two hundred; and indeed there seems never a shortage of volunteers, by which token one may assume that the risks are felt to be worth the taking. Occasionally a noble maid joins the ranks of gladiatrices, but not many; I confess that I regard such as slightly tinted in her wits, and would look upon her askance. Yet it happens occasionally.

You will probably wonder, cynically, how many gladiatrices do survive fifteen combats. The answer must be, more than you would imagine; as a ratio I would say about twenty-five per cent. Yet to achieve this one would have to be utterly ruthless and possessed of great good fortune. The survivors are the best fighters. Or the most ruthless. Or the luckiest, depending on what you believe. If one of the captured women survived, which I do not think has yet happened, we would return her to her tribe.

Gladiatrices fight without armour, in a tight-fitting brown tunic edged with white; they carry no shield. The noble weapons such as mace, axe and sword are denied them, but there are many other weapons of which you have no knowledge. First, there is a weapon much like your machete, but with a saw edge; and on each side of the blade are miniscule spikes which tear and mutilate the flesh. Then there is the javelin; I have seen this thrown with such deadly accuracy and power that it passes right through the victim's body. Then there is a weapon not too dissimilar from your cross, but with a long handle; and on each of the three ends of the weapon are sharp, pointed blades.

Gladiatrices have a most acrobatic style of fighting. Whereas we, the warrior castes, stand toe to toe with an opponent, they, lacking armour, leap and twist in their combat, which is most wonderful to behold; thus

is life preserved. And indeed, blood is not spilt in this way more than once a month, so that a gladiatrice does not have that short a life. And their life is very good, while they live, as to food, drink and love. Yet naturally death is an ever-present reality. It is quite a matter of chance who, and indeed when, they fight in the arena; each gladiatrice is given a number and eight numbers are drawn by their Commander from a sealed box on each occasion. Life is therefore not necessarily short. I am told, too, that when their numbers are drawn in this way, there is a joyful cry and much eagerness evident; for each combat brings them nearer to their much-sought advancement to the warrior caste. It may be imagined that whatever their relations are outside the arena, with such a goal no quarter is given once inside the arena.

On this particular evening, however, it was not the gladiatrices who were the primary interest. Drusilla and I, bearing Selene with us, had been escorted by our guards to the arena. We went eagerly, young maids that we were; and for me it was a great moment, for I was representing mine mother for the first time. Nor was it merely that; by delegation I had the power of life and death over the combatants. I could have a stricken maid despatched; and I knew well that any hesitation on mine part, stimulated by compassion, would be seen as weakness by the people who packed the arena. There was hardly a seat to be had. It seemed that all the city was there. As I took mine seat, there was a roar of applause, which I graciously acknowledged.

The gladiatrices were never first, there were other things to see first - like an armoured maid fighting a monster, it having been stunned by one of our weapons at low power outside the city. The contest was not as unequal as it would appear, for the brute's strength made it very dangerous and but for her armour the maid would have been torn to pieces in seconds. Selene, Drusilla and I were on the edge of our seats, as we saw her picked up as a doll and dashed against the stone wall of the arena. I thought sure she was finished, and she was indeed part-stunned; yet her axe was still attached to her wrist by the leather thong, and she still had a chance. The beast leapt at her with a roar, but she got in a blow, which stopped it in its tracks, bellowing. She scrambled to her feet, dazed as we could see. "Strike again, fool!" Drusilla breathed. But she did not, and the animal struck her on the bascinet with its great paw. She reeled backwards across the arena.

"By Inanna!" gasped Selene, excitedly, "her head must be ringing!".

"Serve the fool right" Drusilla laughed, "now had I been there.....".

The maid slew the monster eventually, cleaving its skull with her axe. Yet she swooned quite away, for she had been much hurt by the beast. And when she was unhelmed it was clearly seen that her face ran with blood. She was carried away to be treated to the cheers of the crowd; we saw her raise a weak hand in acknowledgement. "A gallant maid in truth" I remarked, much excited.

The next bout was more serious, since it was a combat to death between two maids, accoutred as for war. I could see Selene did not approve. When I quizzed her, she shrugged: "They are two noble maids. 'Tis not greatly encouraged but permitted. I like not personal quarrels, yet 'tis better to cauterise it in this way, lest the quarrel fester". In truth it was; for a maid who will not defend her honour is no true Amazon maid.

The arena was now quiet, absorbed; for everyone knew but one would walk away. The sound of axe against metal was like a whiplash. Although they were completely sealed, the gasps and cries of the combatants were plainly heard. For about twenty of your minutes it went on; at the beginning combat was savage, each anxious to slay. Yet it was soon obvious that strength was being sapped, and that the combatants wished to be anywhere but where they were, doing what they were doing. Yet, a combat such as this, once started cannot be stopped. For that would imply cowardice, which is quite impossible for us.

It takes great skill, not to say strength, to slay a member of your own kind, as well protected as you are, and possessed of identical skill. This they both found. The sand of the arena was greatly churned by their footwork; and then, quite suddenly, the combat ended, as it was bound to do, in death.

One shrieked and reeled away. Now, it is not exactly forbidden to cry out when you are injured, that would be folly; yet it is frowned on, regarded as unseemly in a warrior, for we are tough people. I glanced at Selene; she was examining her finger nails as if she had never seen them before. Turning to Drusilla I saw the look of pure disdain on her lovely face. Turning again to the combatants I saw that both maids were on their feet. Yet one was staggering drunkenly, helpless; her opponent followed her and she took two good blows to the helmet before she went down under the merciless axe. I looked down at the writhing body, with detachment, curious. There was a thin crack on the front of the bascinet through which blood oozed, at first slowly, then faster. Her arms were flat on the sand, hands clenching and unclenching spasmodically.

I leaned back in the Queenly throne. "'Tis all over, my friends!".

"Ay, all over" Drusilla replied unemotionally. "Yet she takes an unconscionable time to die, does she not?".

Selene said nothing. Her disapproval was total. Then she sighed: "Ay, tis over, Olympias. Not tidily, indeed, but effectively".

The victor knew her rights. She was entitled to terminate her victim. The maid had no pity, none at all. Her axe descended onto the prostrate figure. I looked away as it was wrenched free but looked again to see the silver legs jerk in death. The victor stood erect, turning to where we were and cried out: "A Judgement!".

Now, centuries before the Queens of Amazonia, appalled at the decimation of the nobility through combats such as this, had ordained that any noble maid who fell in such a combat would not be ured, as befits her rank, but her body left outside the city walls to decompose. This is an insupportable shame to any noble family, and had the result of drastically curtailing, if not stopping such combats. When, as in this case, the quarrel was so deep, so bitter, there was no alternative to bloody arbitrament.

The crowd now took up the victor's cry. The cry bounced off the walls of the arena and hammered in mine ears. I was representing mine mother that night; I was effectively their Queen. I knew that if I wanted not a riot, I would have to invoke the age-old judgement. I rose in my place and in a clear, loud voice I spoke it:-

"To the victor the spoils. To the worms the body".

There was a roar of applause. I sat. Selene said: "You had no choice. The law is the law".

Drusilla touched my hand: "Bravely done, my sister. Your first time. As Selene said, the law is the law".

We watched the dead maid being dragged out to derisive catcalls; then they were drowned in the cheers for the victor. Then came plebeians with rakes rendering the sand smooth again.

I was slightly unhappy about condemning a brave maid to such ignominy and was even more unhappy when the dead maid's mother came begging the body. Selene turned to her, speaking mighty sharp: "The Reyin has spoken, be off with you. Know you not she speaks for the Queen and the law".

I interfered. "Nay, wait. You have other daughters?".

"Two, Reyin. Yet she who fell was my youngest".

I understood well but I had to remember that it was part of my high rank to make harsh judgements. "It grieves me but I can do nothing. The law must be observed. Be content that your daughter died so bravely". She went, grieving.

Drusilla smiled: "Well said, Olympias. Yet 'tis sad to reject a mother's plea. Now I bethink me, there is some doubt whether the word 'body' encompasses both flesh and bones. It may be possible that when the flesh has been consumed by maggots, the mother could have the bones for urn-ing".

"I believe not in so twisting the law" Selene said severely, with a toss of her dark hair, "and you do ill to suggest it to Olympias. The royal house are defenders of the law, not its detractors. Exceptions cannot be made. And you, a Reyin, know it full well, having sworn, with Olympias, to lay down your life for the law".

Mine sister coloured to the roots of her hair, her hand dropping to her dagger. "Your reproof is too round, Selene. Were it anyone else I would slay you. Have a care, and remember to whom you speak".

Selene was her usual fearless, imperturbable self: "I am the Guardian of the law and 'tis my place.....".

"I say again, beware, Selene" Drusilla cried hotly. "I will not tolerate it. You presume on my love.....".

I took their hands. "You are both right, brave warriors both. Your heart is large, Drusilla; and Selene speaks for the law, by the book. Now, hush, I pray you and quench the fire in your eyes". I took Drusilla's finger from around her dagger, and kissed them. She sighed, relaxing. Then I did the same to Selene, who smiled also. After this they were better friends than ever; for Drusilla flared quickly, but anger was easily quenched. "Now, here come the gladiatrices".

To cheering they entered the arena, and approaching where we sat, they looked up and saluted us, after our fashion - that is, by clenched right hand to left breast. Then they invoked the deity: "Inanna, Help! Help! Help!" they cried.

They were stalwart maids indeed. They turned, throwing themselves into battle stance, knees bent; they circled looking for an opening. I glanced at Drusilla. She was on the edge of her seat, lips moist but slack in her lovely face; beneath her stola her nipples were, I could see, like iron, and her breasts mighty agitated. This was meat and drink to her. I too was greatly excited and Selene too was animated, her cheeks of a rosy hue, her eyes sparkling. "Now" Drusilla breathed, "we shall see some blood flow!". Think no ill, you surface dwellers, for courage is to us an indispensable virtue; and these gladiatrices had it in plenty.

They would dart in, striking, then dance away, as their blow was parried before their opponent could strike. Then as their opponent attacked, they would twist out of harm's way. Each twist brought forth applause from the people; but naturally it could not go on. The maid with the cross, previously described, whirled it; her opponent ducked and it sailed over her head. The other maid leapt up and before she of the cross could control her heavy weapon, the maid with the machete leapt in slicing through her enemy's left arm. You could plainly hear the saw-edge rasp against the bone of the arm. There was a shriek, the 'cross of death' dropped into the sand, and the stricken one sank to her knees in pain and clutching her wounded arm, just waited for termination. Selene remarked drily: "She has five bands on her arm. So near to freedom".

The arena erupted: "Terminate! Terminate!". The victor wasted no time in killing the stricken one, by splitting her head with her weapon. The blood discoloured the sand.

There were three left, two with machetes, one with a javelin. The one

with the javelin actually smiled, or rather made a grimace that passed for it. Yet the malice was chilling. She had eight bands on her arm and it was obvious that she fully intended to have seven. And I guessed what her tactic was. She stayed close to the 'cross of death'. As she was attacked she jabbed with the javelin, effectively keeping her enemies away, yet I knew that eventually she would have to throw the javelin. Selene chuckled, lazily: "One wound to another and she will use the javelin". So it proved. One of her opponents was a remarkable handsome maid, for a plebeian, and she, throwing caution to the winds, leapt at the javelin-holder. It was an error. We saw a quick lunge and the point of the javelin pierced the maid's belly, not deeply, but painfully; she cried out in pain, breaking off the fight, and, holding her wound, stumbled away moaning.

The other gladiatrice was by now in a desperate situation. She knew it; fear rippled in her eyes like water. Again the javelin lunged, ripping the tunic; blood spurted, turning it from brown to black. Then it started to run down her leg. The arena was hushed now, knowing the end was near. She of the javelin laughed; her right hand jerked back, and the javelin flew. The maid twisted desperately but her wound slowed her down.

The weapon entered under the left breast and the bloodied point emerged under the shoulder-blade. Her face contorted in agony and dropped sideways, the javelin supporting her in an unnatural position. Blood streamed from the slack mouth.

The victor bent and picked up the 'cross of death'. With arrogant lack of haste she crossed to the other maid who still was on her knees, holding her belly. The cross rose and smashed down. "By Inanna" I muttered faintly, "I rejoice much that we are not gladiatrices!".

Mine words were drowned in the roar of applause; but the surviving maid gave a galvanic bound in the air: "Victory!" she shrieked. And victory it was indeed. The Commander of the Gladiatrices then entered the arena and publicly removed the eighth band from her arm. Then the corpses were dragged out feet first.

"And in truth" Drusilla remarked, "that was a very good evening's entertainment".

"Ay, and there is more to come" Selene laughed.

I am sure I do not have to justify our recreations when I know well that on the surface thousands of people are killed in wars, both official and unofficial (what I believe you refer to as 'bush-fires'), crime, famine, disease and other causes; I know further that you have, and play with destructive weapons that could destroy your world and ours. Therefore, I do not seek to justify our pleasures, what you would call, 'blood-sports'.

When the city was built, the restrictions of the site prohibited the building of a theatre. To speak truth, we were always a physical people, preferring a stadium to a theatre. So the arena, when swept clean of sand, is used as a theatre also. Being such an ancient culture we have an exceedingly rich theatrical tradition; not only do we have an immense amount of Greek and Roman plays (many of which you have lost through your wars and vandalism) and those of our own culture; and through the centuries our scholars have translated the best of surface writers into our own tongue, which is basically ancient Egyptian with later variations. Your own Shakespeare is not unknown to us, although we naturally have a greater affection for your few female playwrights, like Aphra Behn. I say 'naturally' as we are a matriarchal society.

We also have a fine musical tradition. Our most popular instruments are the harp (with which you are familiar with) and the cittern; also the theorbo-lute which our maids play very finely. It is an accomplishment common to all maids, although our main talents are in physical life.

Life in Themis is not of course idyllic and I would not wish to leave you with this impression. In fact, our chief enemy is boredom and we have many facilities to minimise this. Chief among these, other than the arena, is the stadium, which stands near the arena. Here all manner of sports are undertaken, just as in your own stadia. The traditional sport amongst us is wrestling, full-blooded, no holds barred entertainment; the sight of gleaming, maidenly bodies contending is delightful to us. Then, once a year, on Maia's Day (in your calendar 18th April) when there occurs what is known as The Conflict, or Fight of the Hundred Maids.

The prize on this day is a large golden bowl and to achieve it one has to be very lucky indeed. Members of the royal house are not permitted to engage in this - it is held to be unseemly - but we attend to present the bowl to the winner. This is not a wrestling contest but a fight with fists such as you know. The hundred maids go into this until only one is left standing. When a maid falls in a stupor she is drawn away by guards to recover. The others fight on. I have known this go on for some hours, for the maids are strong and skilled in all physical activities. Yet eventually one remains and it is she who gets the cup. It is no shame to be demolished; participation is what matters.

Then there is archery. While this no longer has any place in war (our armour being impervious to arrows) it is traditional with us, for in very early times we were renowned for it. Alas, that the world has gone on and technology has made it obsolete! Yet we retain our skills and are very proud of our skill. Our bow is smaller than your longbow, more apt to our stature. With us speed is of the essence and it is amazing the amount of arrows a proficient archer can loose at the target within a measured period of time. In the days when we walked where you walk, and we had horses, our records say that maids would, purely for sport, stand on galloping horses and shoot at target while on the move. That must have been a very fine and exciting sight but except in drawings we know not what a horse is like.

Yet with all this activity, restlessness remains; and one duty a Queen has (and it is no great cross to bear) is to lead our warriors on yearly raids into the territory of the primitive patriarchal tribes. It is, to us, delightful to fight men, and to defeat them, for they rely on their strength greatly. Yet we are superior in all ways, and they fear us greatly, and with justice. Yet is there always the possibility of death and it is this that stimulates us. On these occasions Drusilla will rub her hands with glee. Yet of course there are other, good reasons for these annual incursions.

Our sperm banks must be kept up, maintained. The product of a man's loins is indispensable to us, for procreation purposes. We sometimes take some women of the tribe to be gladiatrices; those reaching the end of their fruitfulness make ferocious fighters, once trained. Yet we fight to keep our wits sharp, for prolonged peace tends to make the spirit sluggish. And this would never do. We do not make raid for plunder, for these tribes have nothing we need. We fight for the sheer joy of it, for men will always contend against us, for it is part of their nature to do so. Yet we find no pleasure in slaying anything so inferior. Yet is man a fighting animal always, and is deaf to the lessons of history. And, as I may judge from monitoring your doings on the surface - Catholic against Protestant, Arab against Jew, Communist against Capitalist - it is much the same with you. And do we take sides in your wars you ask? Why, ay, for the Jews are of our race, so naturally we take sides.

Yet must we now pass on to consider the tragedy of Olympias and her sister, Morpasia, who were destined to fight to the death for the golden throne of Amazonia.

The Amazons of Sain Arien are the most ancient race now existing in Western Europe for we are Neanderthal, untainted for the most part by Cro-Magnon blood. By a strange combination of circumstances which you shall hear it has been possible for us to remain so. Yet must I start at the very beginning.

As all our race we came first from Anatolia, which was the home of what we call the Eastern Confederation, so-called to distinguish it from the later empire formed in Western Europe. In the remote times of which I speak our chief place was Themiscyra on the shores of what you call the Black Sea, near the modern town of Tirebolu, as far as we are able to ascertain from our chronicle.

Then comes an emissary of Egypt, one Senmut, speaking for the new Pharaoh, Hatshepsut, who, having heard that we were great warriors, invited members of our race, to the number of one hundred, to come to her realm to be her personal bodyguard. For she could not rely on the Palace Guard, she being a maid. And our Queen spake saying she could not order her warriors to travel so far from their land but if any wished to volunteer for this duty, which was to defend one of our sex, she would in no wise stand in their way. And, as it is written, one hundred of our bravest warriors did so volunteer and with their families in attendance did cross the many wearisome miles of desert. Senmut hurried on before so that when we reached the frontier of her land, our caravan was met by this gracious lady Hatshepsut with her full Court. We were regarded with awe by the Egyptians, for with our helmets of bronze, our tunics of red leather, our shields, our knee high boots of soft calf, our fur cloaks, and our weapons of spear and sword, we were a brave picture indeed.

So we served this great Queen, accompanying her in her expedition to the land of Punt, and were much honoured by her with fine houses and much land. And the Queen leaned much on our loyalty, for she knew well her position to be precarious for she was the first maid to rule Egypt, and many were affronted thereby. Yet we guarded her well, and for twenty good years she reigned in outward peace and prosperity. Yet her nephew, one Thutmose, during this time grew to manhood, and had great appetite to sit where the Queen sat. Then the Queen suddenly died, in a most suspicious way; and while she was being embalmed and we, her servants, grieved, the Palace Guard rose up and after a bitter battle in the Royal apartments our people were all slain most piteously.

All this while the said Thutmose stood by, smiling; and our warriors being slain he ordered that they should be dragged behind horses across the desert and cast into the great waters that led we knew not where. Then he gathered together the families of the slain - mothers and daughters of the dead, also those warriors who slept in their houses on that day, and offered them a choice. Either to be put to the sword, every one, or to leave Egypt and never return; for, said Thutmose, rule was appropriate to men, not women, whose sole function was as breeders of lusty sons. And our people, for the protection of our daughters, thought it meet to leave Egypt, and were thus driven into the desert before the spears of the Egyptians, who rejoiced greatly to see us so discomfited.

So did we become nomads, wandering for many moons, whilst our daughters grew in beauty and strength, being taught warlike skills by them who had governance of them. Then, passing through the land of a giant people known to you as the Mullion people, we came ultimately to a great mountain range near a great sea on the west, and the Middle Sea to the north; and near these mountains did we make our home. Here we prospered mightily and multiplied, submitting ourselves for procreation purposes to men of our race (which is to say, Neanderthal) yet otherwise holding ourselves pridefully separate. Male children were returned to their fathers, but the maids were raised as warriors.

For many years we lived thus, under our warrior Queens, such as the great Merine, first of that name. Because of our skill in war, we hired ourselves out to other tribes and nations, to Carthage, but pre-eminently to Atlantis. It was the Atlanteans who made us what we now are; for our treaty with them was simply our warlike skills in return for learning, their great skills were taught in their fine schools and to these were our young maids admitted and waxed not only in beauty and strength but in the ancient wisdoms. So whatever your 'experts' say, Atlantis was a great reality, and we are grateful for it, even to this day.

At this time there was, in the southern part of Atlantis, living beside a great lake a tribe of women under their leader, one Medusa; and this tribe were called Gorgon. And they were most troublesome to the Atlanteans, whose king decreed that they must be destroyed for the peace of the state. To this end he invoked his treaty with us. We, with great joy (as is our way, even today) buckled on our bronze armour and took the field against them. Yet was it a terrible battle, for the Gorgons were wild creatures, with no fear; they had black hair, which they wore to their waist and as they went into battle screamed mightily seeking to bring dismay to the hearts of their opponents. Yet were our maids, greatly disciplined, not affected by this. And the Reyin Alethea, who had command of our maids, bade them attack fearlessly and the day would be ours.

Now, this Medusa took as her emblem the snakes which infested the lake by which they lived; and her helmet had these snakes carved on it, giving her a fearsome aspect. Yet did Alethea engage her in mortal combat with great skill and courage. Such fierce fighters were the Gorgons that the first three ranks of our maids were laid waste in our first attack. Yet our brave maids went on over the bodies of their comrades and achieved ultimate victory. The gallant Alethea, our noble Princess, slew Medusa and took her head, which she sent by messenger to the king, in a leathern bag, at which there was great rejoicing. Yet Alethea was much distressed by the loss of life among the maids, and, as is our way even today, could not leave our dead in their blood. So, after a day's rest, she ordered to be cut with our axes some wood which was plentiful thereabouts, and with it a funeral pyre made. Then were our brave dead stripped of their equipage and placed thereon, and consumed by fire. Yet the Medusans were left to rot where they lay. Then we marched away, looking not back.

For many years we lived happily in Atlantis, thinking often of the rest of our people left in Afrique, or Africa as you say. Then occurred what is known to us as 'the great fire' but which you call a cataclysm. We had long known of the danger from the Atlantean astronomers. What it was I know not, perhaps a comet; but what it was we knew not for certain, except that it came from the sky and was dangerous to the cantel known as Earth.

There was great panic in Atlantis. Some Atlanteans sailed to the west, making landfall on the great continent we knew to be there; others fled over the landbridge which then existed linking us to what you call South America. We, the Amazons, took counsel among ourselves and decided that if we had to die (as seemed likely) we would prefer to do so among our own people. Thus we took ship, and landed thankfully on the coast of Afrique, seeing in the distance the mountains of our people. As we came ashore, mothers, daughters, children, splashing happily through the surf in our eagerness to be home, our eyes ever turned skywards, for the great orb in the sky grew daily larger, and redder, and we, who normally feared nothing, were greatly affrighted; for this was an enemy that had not sword and buckler, with which we could contend, but destruction that could not be challenged. What followed I can best describe by using a direct quotation from the chronicle in our Hall of Records, which is a copy of an earlier, almost undecipherable now, parchment original:-

"Our Queen led us into the mountains and into the caves. Then, after the days of its travel were accomplished, the orb entered the air of earth which became so hot that it burned the throats of all maids, and mothers held daughters to their bosoms. Our body armour and helmets became hot to the touch, and were cast aside, and there was much wailing among the people. And then came the red fire which consumed all things that lived upon the earth; ay, even the great animals that walked upon the earth and likewise those that flew in the sky, making war on all people, burst into flame and fell screeching to the earth, where they perished. And after the fire came the trembling of the earth and some of the caves wherein we sheltered closed up in an instant burying many maids and their progeny; then did the mountains raise themselves and we with them. And then the sea did boil and spread over the land. And looking out we did see bodies floating, yea, so thick were they that they appeared unto us a carpet, both animals and men. Yet the end was not yet. Then came the darkness that covered the earth for many days and it was to us as if the moon had deserted us or been thrust from its path. Then came the choking dust which we could scarce escape by retreating further into our mountains. Then finally came the black rain that fell for days; though we had no means of measuring time, we judged it to be forty. After this a pale sun shone, yet it was not in the same place as heretofore, and we marvelled much at it. The heat from the sun caused a choking steam to rise and then, as an end, came a great wind that blew it away. And thus did we venture forth from our caves timidly to see a new world. Or rather, one much different than we had known. From those maids who had died we tore cloths which we tied around our sandalled feet for protection; yet had we taken not many steps before the cloth started to smoulder, and we yet again retreated into the caves, while the land cooled. Then, after some days we emerged yet again. And our Queen said, we will go down into the valley, and there live, for the ball of fire will come not again. And so it was.

And the Queen spake again, ordering all this to be set down by scribes, lest it be forgotten with the passage of time, which was a good and Queenly thing to say. And she spake again saying that all the mighty things we had learned in Atlantis should likewise be written down for the teaching of our daughters, present and to come. Then we sought out such men as remained, and surrendered ourselves to them, bringing forth maids to follow us, yet returning the men children to their fathers, for we would have none of them. And the maids wax in strength and beauty, and being taught the skills of arm and heart, did follow the trade of their mothers, and took our fame far and wide when their time came to bear sword, shield and bow. And made us much feared, yet sought after as allies.

Then, countless moons later, when our numbers were very great, the then Queen, spake on this wise: "Our numbers being so great, I will take half of our people and take ship, even to Iberia, and there carve out an empire, to be known as Amazonia, and leaving in my place the Reyin Calindra". And so it was we came to Iberia, making landfall at the place you know as Lisboa; and we spread all over the land bringing peace and justice, and knowledge of Inanna to the wild and savage tribes, who practised such inhuman cruelties as sacrificing maids to the glory of their male Gods. And in the years that followed did we spread over the great mountains to Gaul where we spread our law as far north as the great river, and thus it was for many years. And those who had resisted us, seeing that we brought peace, resisted no more, even to the men of the tribes. Yet there were some who would not accept our rule, and these retreated into caves and the inner earth, where we sought them not. And so lived we for many years, and many generations of maids issued from our bellies, until the giants from the east came against us".

By giants the scribe plainly meant Cro-Magnon men, who appeared as giants to our ancestors; and likewise Gods for no maid had seen men with fair

hair before this time, and those who stood six feet tall. While on this matter, I will make a small digression, before continuing the history of our people.

We are greatly angered when we read of our race being described as "insensitive and brutish". What may have been in the early days I know not; yet when your ancestors came from the east and we saw for the first time your great size, it was not so. A tribe was (and is) a caring community, or unit in your own jargon; the aged were not thrust out from the family as in your own society. The wisdom of the aged was respected and far from being a nuisance, as is the case with you, as I understand (wherefore do you have 'homes for the elderly' if it is not so?), the old are cherished. Nor do we think it a duty so much as an act of love, for had they not created us and breathed life into us? And so it is with us even to this day. For as we love and respect them, they glory in us, our courage and strength; for this they bred us up.

Yet are we patient with your lack of knowledge. It seems to us that gradually you are learning the truth, although when your archaeologists dig up something that does not accord with your own preconceptions you disbelieve it, you ignore it, placing it in the cellars of your museums and forget it. This is arrant folly; and we who know more than you, tell you so, for what you think happened in pre-history did not, in fact, happen. I will cite you a case.

You disbelieve in Atlantis. Very well, you have this privilege. You think Plato lied? Yet to what end? He said, truthfully, that Atlantis was beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Yet you disbelieve it. Yet I tell you true, you islanders of Albion, or Britannia, or Britain as you now say, dwellers in an island moist and fruitful, do so because of the cataclysm previously mentioned. And the sinking of Atlantis in one day allowed the warm waters to reach, melting your ice caps; and I say, may your patriarchal God help you if, in another such convulsion, Atlantis should rise again. Your island is but that which remained after the inundation. The land of Lyonesse, which is but a quaint legend to you, which lay beyond what you call Cornwall was low-lying and fair. Yet were you only part of a great land-mass, and I tell you that between Britain and Gaul was once a land-bridge, as also between your land and the now-island of Ireland. Yet you will believe me not, this I know.

Likewise you who fly to the moon, as I am told, know not what is beneath your feet; for although you think it to be solid rock beneath your feet, it is not in all places. There exists what you would call a parallel universe, but what we call subterranea. For the preservation of our race against your ancestors (against whom we could manifestly not prevail) we went below the earth, and so remain to this day. This others did also, yet these did not, as did we, have learning and knowledge. Thus, they remain, as you would say, primitive. Yet we, the Amazons of Sain Arien, learned much from the Atlanteans, and are greatly advanced. I do wish I could say how much; yet such is not within mine brief. For there is an unwritten law, to which we adhere, that a superior race must not interfere with an inferior, giving them information for which mentally they are not prepared to adjust to. Believe it if you can; and if you cannot, no matter. Whether you believe or not, it is so. I now return to pure history.

One day then, intelligence was brought to our Court in the foothills of the Pyrenees that the savage tribes of the north had combined together to destroy Amazonia and the civilisation of centuries. Then did the Queen call her Council together and sent an army, under the command of her daughter Cleone, to destroy these northern devils. They crossed the great river near the present-day town of Chinon and marched through the forests, north-east to meet the foe. And near your modern city of Dijon we met their horde and gave battle. The men of the north appeared unto the maids as giants, wielding huge axes and clubs. Yet Cleone, like any

Amazon Reyin, fearlessly led her maids against the foe, in her war chariot; she fought bravely but was struck from her chariot and was hacked to pieces where she lay, whilst the battle raged around her body. The fight was bitter and long, the maids performing prodigies of valour; yet was it inconclusive. At the end of the day very many of the maids lay dead, their blood covering the earth. Yet such casualties had they inflicted on the enemy that they could not destroy the maids any more than the maids they. Darkness fell and the patriarchals withdrew to lick their wounds, and likewise our people. Yet we, whilst such of our officers as remained took counsel together, other maids dug a pit and in it placed our princess, with her war chariot, her shield, sword, axe and spear, and all things appertaining to her; for they could not allow her body to fall into the hands of the patriarchals. For the rest of our warriors there was nothing to be done and sorrowing much they left them where they had fallen on the battlefield. Then they voided the field in good order, in grief for their sisters, bearing their shields and axes in their hands.

They could not retreat south, for the earth seemed to vomit patriarchal tribesmen; so they plunged into the great forests wandering north-east. Then the officers decided that matriarchy, from this moment forth, could survive only in secret, for against these giants we could not prevail. Our day was done, said they, and the case was altered with us. At this they grieved much, for Amazon rule had been fair and just, whereas what was to come was brutal and bloody. Then our priestess took counsel of Inanna, and coming to hills in which there were caves we entered into them.

Then was a messenger despatched to our Queen, far to the south, bidding her come to us, bringing with her all our learned maids, and records; for our rule was over and there was nought to be done. And our messenger, travelling only by night, by the grace of Inanna reached the Court of our Queen, who received the news in dismay. But she, being greatly wise, understood well and knew the future was not ours. For we were greatly advanced in the occult sciences and could read what was to come. Then, abandoning our homes, did the remnants of our nation march to where stands now your town of Bayonne and there took ship to the north. And those who had fought in the battle, placing fingers against the Third Eye, saw what had transpired and rejoiced mightily that their Queen would soon be among them. Thus was a party of maids despatched south to the great river by secret ways and with great stealth; and coming nigh to a village where now stands your city of Angers there waited in the forest many wearisome days. Then, as it appears, after this time came six ships into the estuary of the great river and the waiting maids could scarcely contain their joy. "Our Queen comes" they said, "now all will be well with us". And so it was; and leading what remained of our nation they came at last to the caves and entered therein, blocking the entrance behind us. Then did they descend into the earth, seeking a home such as they had never known, yet safe from the giant men who had such hatred towards them.

For several days our ancestors, as it is told in the chronicle, went deeper into the earth, seeking relief from the cold, for we were used to southern sun. Then they met warmth, so that they could throw back their fur cloaks, and the maids smiled for the first time since they had marched north to do battle. And remaining of our nation were more than two thousand maids, including children.

Then came they to a great void in the earth and great hills reaching upwards, with high crags. During this time they were greatly tormented by great beasts, the like of which they had not seen before, but of which they had heard, being called "devils of the northern forests". "Tis here" the Queen said, looking upwards with joy, "on this great cliff will we live, and build a mighty city". For with us we had skills

in all the Atlantean disciplines, even to the working and carving of stone. Yet we bore with us no maid skilled in the design of building, so we were much daunted. Thus, for many moons we dwelt together in huts, happily enough, yet yearning for a city such as we had known in Atlantis. Then, after two Queens had died, the new Queen spake, saying: "It is unseemly that warriors should live thus and till land, for it is much against our traditions. I pledge that a city will be built. To this end I will myself lead some maids to the surface world and find one competent to design us a city". Hearing this all maids rejoiced mightily.

Then the Queen rose to the surface with her maids; and truth it is that they found the world much changed. For now there were fine cities and an efficient, if cruel, patriarchal society. Thus it was that near the city of Augusta Rauricorum the Queen came across and made prisoner a party of Roman surveyors, who were much astonished at the sight of our people, so much that they put up little resistance. And the Queen, taking them into the earth, struck a bargain with them (to which the Queen had no intention of adhering) that they should design a city such as those of their own race, after which they would be free to go. To this they agreed in great fear; and our skilled maids in the working of metal took their armour and studied it, and from that time, after centuries of experimentation, reached that skill that you shall hear much of later.

The surveyors cried for labour to fulfil their task; and we, having none such, rose to the surface yet again and made prisoner a whole village of men. And knowing the nature of men, also made they prisoner women of their tribe to pleasure them. These men, under Roman instruction, cleared the plateau upon which we had settled, rendering it flat, or near flat. Upon this site they erected our city of Themis, first building great walls of huge blocks of stone, worked to such fineness that a sword blade cannot be inserted between them. These blocks are what your writers call cyclopean, meaning huge, and deriving from Cyclops. Yet our walls are Roman, made of stone to hand in the valley at the foot of our great cliffs and drawn up to the plateau under Roman whips by sheer muscle-power and a series of primitive cranes. Many men died in the doing of this, but this was of small import as there were many other men to be taken at will from surface tribes.

You have a saying: Rome was not built in a day. Nor was Themis, for it took two lifetimes to accomplish. Yet at the end of that time it stood complete, from peristyle to cloacae and we were mighty pleased with it, for it was what we had longed for for many moons.

The Roman men had died long before the completion but they had passed on their skills to our maids, so this was a small matter; and we buried them in the valley at the foot of the cliffs, after the manner of their people. When the people looked on our fair city, with its stately public buildings and large Forum, we knew the debt we owed to these men; and our ancestors raised a memorial to them, which still stands near our Temple although the letters are now hard to read. Yet the name of the chief of them, Petrus Maximus, is clear enough.

All this was done many centuries before my time, sometime around the time of your teacher, Christ, it is thought.

During the building of the city the surface people had bred mightily and we needed them not. Thus the Queen, having thought much on the matter, made a judgement that I do not seek to defend, merely to report. Thus she spake: "We need not the men. These we will thrust out from the city. For we may not, for our security, return them to the surface. The monsters will see an end of them. Yet we need servants to do our bidding as we are warriors, and undertake no servile work. Thus will we retain the women and their maids for rearing up as our servants". And thus it was, and from these are our present plebeians descended.

Since that time we have had no cause to rise to the surface, except on one occasion (of which you shall hear, when the Guardian Selene, very adequately protected against your bacteria, plucked Olympias back from the surface) for this something against which we have, mostly wisely, set our face.

It cannot be seriously maintained that a Neanderthal race could live among its racial supplanter, even today, when surface dwellers claim (although not practice) toleration for minorities. You may consider what the situation would be if you had a visitation from a people from a dying planet (or cantel, as we say, it being the older word) seeking permission to live amongst you - and some of you believe this has occurred, as I understand - as a body. Such permission would not be granted, for one mark of your race is to destroy what you do not understand, or is outside your experience. If you want not members of your own race that are of another colour living amongst you (and some marks of our geographical origin are still present among us) what chance would there be for us, who are an older race? And, moreover, the race that preceded your own, and you thought you had destroyed? For we have noted the manner in which you treat other ancient races, even descending to the matter of near-genocide to acquire what belonged to them. Ay, we know your proceedings very well. What future would there be for us among you, I ask again, and answer None; especially when we like to live, despite our greatly sophisticated advances, as our ancestors live. Nay, 'tis best we stay apart for ever. We keep you under surveillance with our equipment, see your follies, witness your inability to live with each other without suspicion, note the security devices with which you have to festoon the doors of your dwellings. In Themis, be it noted, no maid would seek to rob another. For such reasons does our resolution deepen.

This is not to say we do not have contacts among your people. We do; one was the recipient and presenter of this history. She was worthy, and much of our mind; and we saw to it that our skills were her skills. And now that she is, sadly, dead, others of her friends likewise serve us, loyally and well; and they, too, are brave maids.

But we must now turn to telling the early years of Olympias, the Queen.

* Although the manuscript does not specify, doubtless the compiler had in mind the treatment of the Aboriginal (Neanderthal) natives of Australia and, especially, Tasmania. Here, during the last century and before, British settlers amused themselves by hunting and shooting the Aborigines; to such good purpose that the last full-blooded Tasmanian Aborigine died in 1876. Thus the hostility of the hybrid Cro-Magnon race for the Neanderthal needs no advocacy, and the situation of the present-day Australian Aborigine race gives no grounds for hope that the supplanting race has become more tolerant of Neanderthal races than in the past.

Just as, on the surface, one can learn from books and still not fully understand, so it was in Themis. I thought I had assimilated the information given to me in the secret way I have indicated; when I actually reached the city, the culture shock was great. It was not just the caste structure, nor the architecture, although being set down in a Roman city was shock enough. Everything I had seen in surface books had been in ruins; Themis was a bustling, colourful city in full working order, and it was astonishing. Nor was it just that of course; there was the question of harness, of armour. Thus, on that first day I had been startled to see maids in armour, and not wearing it self-consciously as in the Fetes Jeanne d'Arc in Orleans, but as if it was the most natural thing in the world, as indeed to us it is.

This was in clear rebuttal of everything I had been taught on the surface. In the village school I had been taught that armour had effectively died on the day gunpowder had been invented, or used thereafter only superficially and for decorative reasons. It had been used to some extent in the seventeenth century but after this had quickly fallen into desuetude. Thus, my shock on that first day was understandable. In our restricted world, gunpowder would be fatal, thus it is eschewed, we preferring the ancient valuation of maid against maid. In our world, therefore, armour is still an absolute necessity.

Once I had been proclaimed free of surface bacteria and received into the bosom of mine family, Drusilla and Selene took me in hand with a vengeance; and because our society is military, it followed that almost the first place I was taken was the Palace armoury. I had only seen such things in museums, and I was, I confess, with mine Amazon blood, greatly excited. I had already been measured for battle armour and Drusilla proudly showed me her own. I was staggered by its beauty and strength; and to please me, Selene armed Drusilla so that I could see.

"One day, quite soon" Selene remarked, deftly locking Drusilla's harness, "you may have to lead our people in combat and it is meet that you should know all matters appertaining to your duty as a Princess".

I was even then daily at what you would call 'battle school' at the guards barracks, next door to that of the gladiatrices, and I was learning much that maids on the surface would consider anathema but which to an Amazon maid is absolutely essential and more so, if that is possible, to someone of mine high rank. So I regarded Drusilla admiringly, but enviously. She gleamed, dully gold. Much to her delight I stroked each part of her harness with an almost orgasmic desire, and she giggled understandingly.

"You will find nothing stronger". I believed it. "Yet, 'tis light to wear, is it not, Selene?"

"Ay, you can wear harness all day without discomfort. And you can fight all day without scathe, except for a bruise or two".

"And who cares about bruises" Drusilla remarked. Who indeed. I was getting my own share in training.

I took the plumed bascinet from Drusilla and stroked it, fascinated. "'Tis triple plate, Olympias". It was indeed. Within it was thickly padded and where it rested on the head was a framework contained in a thick roll of leather. The temptation to try it on was uncontrollable, while the others smiled with approval at mine instincts. The bascinet rested comfortably on the head, and was astonishingly light. Then Selene took the helmet from me and placed it on Drusilla's dark head; and lo! mine sister disappeared and where she had been was a gleaming warrior, a solid mass of metal. And I could not wait until I was similarly accoutred. She took the large round shield and heavy ridged mace from Selene and placed herself in battle stance. I was thrilled. "All this will be yours, Olympias" Selene announced quietly. "It pleases you?"

I MEET MORPASIA

It pleased me right well; but I knew how far I had to go before I was recognised as a warrior, and I was somewhat jealous of Drusilla, who I knew was spoken of as a strong and fearless fighter. She read what I was thinking, as we have the facility to do, and reached out and took my hand in her gauntleted one. "Nay, Olympias, be not jealous of this, my armour. 'Tis early days yet. You will be a warrior, and a great one. So say your instructors. And you grow stronger every day, losing your surface weakness. Remember, sister, what we learn in our young years, slowly and easily, you are having to learn quickly and painfully. So must it be, for you are the firstborn, our future Queen". Before her love and loyalty I felt ashamed.

"Yet" I murmured, flushing with the knowledge of mine high station, "they tell you in the surface world that armour is archaic, meet only for museums and such-like places. And this bascinet shape, conical as the word is, was superseded centuries ago".

"Yet have we retained it, since it deflects a blow so well, even an axe blow".

Selene unlocked Drusilla's bascinet from the neck armour and hung it up, and then proceeded to do the same with the body armour while I watched entranced. As yet I had only worn practice armour to protect the body while I was being belaboured by the instructors. Then, wistfully, I murmured: "It must be fun to fight in earnest".

"Ay, if you fall not, Olympias. Then is your life forfeit; for a victor has every right to terminate you with her axe. And look for no aid in the heat of battle, for once the fighting starts it is every maid for herself".

"Hmm! 'Tis a dangerous business, war; here as on the surface".

"Nay, Olympias" smiled Selene, exchanging an amused glance with Drusilla, "say not so. For a maid to be slain in battle is glory. Our mothers pray for this on our behalf".

"As indeed they should" Drusilla nodded, watching Selene remove her leg armour. "Were we not born for this?".

"Some might say we were born for life".

"Your armour will ensure that you live long".

"Yet accidents do happen".

"Ay, that is the excitement of it".

I nodded, smiling. "So it is, Drusilla; and it is an excitement to which I look forward greatly, never having known it, as yet. Admittedly the risk of death is there, but if one has to drop, it appears to me, even as a novice warrior, that to do so in the harness of a noble is glory indeed".

They looked at each other in delight. "Now, by the bones of Inanna" said Drusilla, moved "there speaks true Amazon blood, a speech worthy of a Reyin. I had much feared that you had too far absorbed the..... what is that word you use, Selene?".

"Pusillanimous?".

"Ay, that is it - pusillanimous attitudes of surface maids. But what can one expect of them, being Cro-Magnon?". In her mouth this was a term of abuse. "But I see well that Olympias is Amazon to her finger-tips, brave and gallant, and I bow to your spirit, sister".

"Nay, no Cro-Magnon, I" I laughed. "You and I, sweet Drusilla, will stand together against our enemies, and die together if need be". And because I was becoming emotional, unseemly in a warrior, I laughed uncertainly: "Have you not seen me in practice? Mine instructors tell me I have a bloodlust most damnable, worthy of the finest noble blood".

"That they do" Selene smiled. "And I have myself watched you. Pure bred Amazon in all things, no matter for your surface years. It is, as you say, after their fashion, fun to fight. I cannot well describe the feeling which every maid must have felt since the Reyin Alethea slew Medusa, and before. There is excitement, true; yet there is also our ingrained instinct for combat. I cannot describe the omnipotence one feels when one cuts down one's first enemy, that is a feeling one can never recapture. It is the triumph of one maid over another, equal in arms, in skill.....ah, that is sweet indeed, to send another maid to Inanna".

"That is true, Olympias" quoth mine sister. "I envy you your first victory. I have savoured it, and the memory makes my heart swell. You will be a great warrior. And I know 'tis but impatience that makes you so anxious to be known as a warrior. Be patient, sister; it will come".

"Ay" I smiled, "there is a saying on the surface, 'Rome was not built in a day' and it seems that likewise it takes long to be a warrior. Tell me, Drusilla, of our warlike history, for in knowledge of this am I sadly deficient".

"Ay, let us talk of war and armour" Drusilla cried, happily, donning her stola, "as befits three warriors gathered together. Yet I defer to Selene, who speaks so well".

Selene does indeed speak well, as befits the Guardian of the Law (or as you would say, Judge); her speech is mellifluous, and her ability to marshal and explain difficult points of law is quite exceptional. Yet in private she can be most pithy. "Know then, Olympias" she smiled, "that for many centuries we fought as did our sisters of the Eastern Confederation, that is, after the Grecian fashion. That is to say, in plumed helmets, a short tunic such as the gladiatrices now wear, large round shield, sword and axe, with knee high calf boots. Then, nearer to our own time, when our scientists invented their machines to see through rock, we saw how warriors on the surface were protected and it seemed to us meet that we too should be even better protected. The surface people used steel, as you are aware; yet our skilled maids produced a much lighter and stronger metal, vastly superior to steel".

"Ay, 'tis so" Drusilla interrupted proudly, "'tis but right that we, the maids of Amazonia, should be better protected than patriarchals".

"That is true enough". Selene smiled, then sighed. "Yet it rendered most weapons obsolete. Arrows, javelins were impotent against it. It has taken much of what you call fun out of fighting. Yet we have our maces and axes, the one to stun, the other to terminate with. It is enough".

"Ay, indeed, dearest Olympias. No nation stands still, and our surgeons can cure even the dread wounds caused by the mace, even as in the surface world, unless the brain be too severely crushed. So we fight, drop, and live to fight again. Such are the wonders of our race".

"One should mayhap add, Drusilla" Selene replied, "that being of the Neanderthal race, our skulls are somewhat thicker than the Cro-Magnons, enabling us to take sterner punishment. For we call the surface people 'egg-shell people', do we not?". We laughed at this. "And yet we have not surrendered all to modernity, for we are a traditional people. We retain our round shields which are totally unnecessary. Yet it is our link with the past, when the world was young, when matriarchy ruled, so we reverence their use. Though we only use them for what Drusilla calls 'serious business'. It is perhaps foolish but if in war I have to drop, I would like to bear the round shield of my ancestors".

"I too" Drusilla nodded, "and you too, Olympias, I doubt not. Yet tell me, sister, am I right in thinking the surface dwellers know nought of our race?".

"Not so" I replied. "All educated people know what we call the Eastern Confederation, and the most famous of their queens, Penthesilea. And of

all those mentioned by the ancient Greek writers. Yet everyone thinks they are myths".

"Do they indeed so?" they laughed. "Then are they truly fools".

"Ay, indeed. Nobody once believed in the existence of Troy, considering it too a myth. Then an amateur archaeologist called Heinrich Schliemann had the temerity to dig it up, after which there were many red faces".

"I doubt it not" Selene remarked, "but see the folly. Our own Hall of Records contains much on Troja. For indeed, the great Penthesilea led a contingent of our race to help the Trojans, for the Greeks were their traditional enemies also. And there was she slain in combat with the patriarchal dog, Achilles. Yet I too have heard of the surface-dwellers' disbelief. Ask not therefore why I hold them in contempt".

"And I likewise, seeing that I was raised with them".

Selene laughed like a bell. "Not so, dear Reyin, for we watched over you. And your surface mother, the surrogate, likewise watched, knowing you to be different to her people. For we implanted the idea in her head. She kept you privily, much in seclusion and you were a dutiful daughter. Yet at no time were you other than Amazon, cool, proud, unafraid. But we were afraid for you". She exchanged a glance with Drusilla, who nodded gravely. "Ay, afraid for you, Olympias. We took you back as soon as we could, for the man who you called father did have much longing for your body, which was something we could in no way permit. For you were our Reyin, the firstborn of our Queen, and one day to rule over us. Nay, either he would have had to die, or we pluck you back to our bosom, from which you should never have been torn. And so we made the second choice, for we owed the man something for his care of you".

I gazed open-mouthed. Then I remembered things, how he had looked at me, gluttonously. A maid knows these things without being told. On the surface she is the prey, the hunted. "But why.....?" I whispered.

"Sim-ple-ton!". Drusilla laughed lightly. "'Tis the nature of men. It is why we live apart, now as in the past. Had we left you there" - she gave a little shudder - "you would have been raped by a man of another race. It does not bear thinking on, does it, Selene?".

"Indeed it does not. You might have given birth to a man child, which is too horrible to contemplate. Such has not been born in Amazonia since we - or rather, our scientists - learned to control the sex of babies. Before that we had to dispose of male babies, which was distasteful to us, for we do not lack compassion. Yet society must be preserved in the way it is. Male children would be a menace to us. Yet in two hundred years not one has been born, nor will they be, our control mechanisms being what they are".

This intelligence had shattered me. The man on the surface had been, in general, kind, but as I grew older I was aware of his interest, which stimulated great unease in me. A maid of the surface might well accept rape as an occupational hazard, but I hated the thought.

"How came it that I was sent to the surface?" I muttered, "'twas no good decision".

"Has the Queen not told you?".

"She seemed not to welcome the question".

Selene seemed ill at ease. "Why, Reyin, I could tell you indeed. Yet this is a matter for Drusilla. For see you now, while I am a member of the Royal Council, this took place before my time. When, in fact, I was playing with wooden swords". She rose, smiling. "I will therefore take my leave, if you will permit me".

Drusilla laughed heartily. "Always circumspect, the Guardian Selene".

"'Tis my legal training!".

When she had left the armoury, Drusilla remarked: "She is doubtless wise". Then: "So come you to the garden and I will tell you the sorry story". She led me forth into the Palace garden, past the fountains, into the shady paths. I thought she was bound for our favourite arbour, yet she stopped by the huge growth of rhododendrons, which I had admired. "You are about to ask how this came here?". I was not, but no matter. "It was discovered growing out of the aqueduct a hundred years since. And since it would damage the ancient stonework, it was removed and brought here, where it has prospered mightily. I doubt not that a seed was carried down from the surface into the subterranean stream and lodged in a crack in the aqueduct. Yet see". She pulled a branch aside and I saw that there was a large open space. "Here" she smiled, in fond memory, "I hid from my nurse when I was child. The gardeners keep it thus for me. So enter, Olympias. 'Tis large enough for two maids like we". It was indeed. With the gnarled roots and foliage around us, it was a private world. So we sat; and it so happened that the light fell on her in such a way as to make me desire her superbly conditioned body. For all Amazon maids are, by dint of our warlike exercises, well developed and strong. And her stola streaked away delightfully from her young, surging breasts. Her cheeks dimpled, knowing mine mind. "Nay, Olympias, look not upon me so hungrily, for I am as much moved by you also and my brain much fevered by your loveliness. So would you hear this tale, look you to the front and I will collect my thoughts". I sighed, placing my lust for her at arm's length; and she began her tale.

"It all began in a lack of communication between the Royal Council and the learned ones, that is, our scientists. These, like their breed everywhere, live in ivory towers. Thus it was that when the Queen was carrying you in her belly, our seers combined to give notice to the Council that within the next fifty years the upper world would make a discovery that would give them the power to unleash weapons of such power unknown since the days of Atlantis. And we, the Amazons of Sain Arien, were thrown into a panic. For this was not a danger we could meet with our armour, mace and axe. As we lived a subterranean existence, we had good cause to fear such weapons, for such a weapon if exploded in this continent would destroy our world. And this apprehension led the Council to make a foolish decision.

Now, you must know, sweet Olympias, that in the Royal Council are usually at least one or two nobles who seek to make the royal house plough their furrow. Old Calvina is one such today, and when you become Queen you must beware of her. But in the days of which I speak there was a noble called Pulcheria, a noble maid of some learning, of good valour and with a mighty silver tongue, as I do hear. She conceived the idea of us returning to the surface, and who should lead us but the Queen's eldest daughter, then unborn. You, Olympias. Naturally our mother agreed not, that you should be placed with a surface woman to learn their ways and when of age, to lead us against the Cro-Magnons. I marvel at such folly, truly. You may say it is easy to say this now, with hindsight, and this may be true. Yet rarely has a plan been more misconceived. Yet, although the Queen agreed not, the Council, was swayed by this Pulcheria, who held forth much on the dangers; and thus was this evil course decided on.

Thus, when you were born, Olympias, you were plucked from the Queen's arms, in most cruel fashion, when she was still weak from the rigours of childbed, and taken to the surface, wrapped in costly linen, and placed on the doorstep. Thus were you raised in Tophet, my sister, far from your loving mother and your noble heritage. It was the grossest treason and I pity you, Olympias, being raised by plebeians. 'Tis a scandal which even today fills the Queen and I, your Drusilla, with much righteous wrath".

"And what happened to this.....this Pulcheria?".

"Peace, you shall hear, my love". She touched my hand, briefly, tenderly; and a deep thrill consumed me. "Now, when they were apprised of it, much too late, the scientists were horrified, tearing their hair in despair, explaining to a shocked Council that it could never be. 'We have lived in this environment for so long, my Queen, we cannot ever rise to the surface. In that place they have germs and bacteria which we are not equipped to sustain. We breathe pure air; they do not. Our maids, our fine warriors, would be destroyed by something we cannot see, and thus would our race fall and die, a secret, invisible enemy consuming them'. Thus they spake, whilst the Council sat dumb-struck, wide of eye and in terror of what they had done.

Our mother let out a screech of rage that echoed through the Palace as I am told; the guards outside the great bronze doors heard it and looked at one another uneasily, and the Council cringed in their seats, for a Queen's wrath is terrible. By this time - I shudder to think of it, sweet sister - you were in the arms of a surface woman, a plebeian, a foundling as she thought, which had been left on the doorstep of her lonely farm. She was childless, and yearned mightily, as do our sex, for a child. The accursed Pulcheria had chosen well! In time she would come to believe, this surface woman, that you were indeed her child, for we have means of manipulating the minds of surface dwellers. 'But my daughter' wailed the Queen, 'what of her?'".

"She will survive, my Queen. Knowing no other life, she will grow up able to withstand the impurities of their life. But she must be left there, my Queen".

This the Queen would in no way do. "Nay, this will not be". And she banged her fist on the table, as I am told, eyes glaring. "'Tis perhaps good that my daughter should learn the ways of the upper world, but she will return to me when she is sixteen. She will, she must".

"But, great Queen" stammered the chief scientist, "she will bring their impurities back with her and we have no means.....I mean we are not sure if we can cleanse her of them".

"Find out then" the Queen snapped. "You have sixteen surface years. Our science is far in advance of theirs. You should have no trouble".

The ancient maid, already in her white hairs, mumbled: "But the ideasthe concepts that will be fixed in her brain? For they are not as we are".

"Find ways to exorcise them. We can implant ideas in their heads, make them see things that are not there. We can manipulate their minds. So reverse the process. It should not be beyond your wit".

So said the Queen. I was not even born, but these matters are recorded in our chronicle, for which, as you know, I have responsibility. So you may take it that it is so. And I have quizzed Calvina on the matter, for she was present.

"And mark me well" the Queen stated sharply, "since my firstborn is to be denied her birthright, the benefits of an Amazon rearing, prepare you a programme of instruction for my Olympias that, when she is five years, may be delivered to her by projection". The learned ones bowed submissively and responding to a Queenly gesture, they departed.

Now, the Queen bent her gaze coldly on the maid who had proposed your fate. "And you, Pulcheria, shall suffer for your temerity. You are here-with banished to the satellite city, there to reflect on your folly for all your days. I no more wish to look upon your face. You have my permission to depart".

Calvina says that tears sprang to Pulcheria's eyes, rare in an Amazon maid, for we are raised toughly. She sank to her knees before the Queen. "Nay, great Olympias. Rather would I be a gladiatrice, and so die. Sentence me not to a living death".

The bleakness in our mother's eyes chilled every member of the Council. "An honourable death in combat is too good for you, Pulcheria. You will return to your villa and prepare, make your farewell to your family and depart. Now go, and shame not your name with fruitless tears, for I shall not relent as you know well. Your crime is heinous and I might well have your head for it. But for your past services I exercise royal clemency. Now go".

Now, not one of Pulcheria's equals dared raise a voice in her defence. They sat there mumchance, mighty happy they had got off so cheaply. For other, earlier Queens, would have banished the entire Council, or had their heads. But our mother is a great Queen, Olympias, as we both know".

When Drusilla ended the recital I sat thinking. Her reference to missing the normal Amazon upbringing was appropriate, and I resented not having it. It is of course a tough rearing, with the accent on physical skills rather than academic learning. In our society one has to know how to fight and die if one has to. In my mother's timeless phrase, that she was given by her teachers and right back to dim antiquity, doubtless - "Remember, Olympias, it is so easy to die if you have to; and it is not the fact of being slain that matters, but the manner of it". And that every maid is taught, and remembers.

Our rearing starts off with wrestling (to make our muscles strong) and ay, boxing too, to get a maid used to being hurt and not to whimper. Then comes academic training; but when you are twelve starts military training with blunted weapons and light armour. Then at sixteen comes complete armour and sharp weapons. So by the time you are eighteen you are a warrior, strong and fearless. Ay, I missed this rearing, and was bitter; for now I was having to learn quickly skills which maids normally were taught over several years. Yet bitterness blights the soul, so I forced a smile and turned to Drusilla.

"So that was the way of it. And did Pulcheria die in the satellite city?"

"That she did. For it is, as you know, no good place to be, partly a penal colony, with but basic amenities, and partly given over to the mining of ores which we have not here. 'Tis a hard life and many die. Do not pity Pulcheria; her punishment was just. As she sowed, so did she reap. But I felt you should know of it".

"Ay, truly, and I thank you". I reached out for her strong young body and she resisted not, but came willingly. I slipped my hand inside her stola and felt her firm breasts, and she gave a fluttering sigh. I undid her belt, while she did the same to me. Our garments hung loosely, revealing our charms.

"'Tis good to be maids".

"Ay" she whispered, "we were designed to give and receive pleasure".

We busied our hands to our mutual contentment. I heard Drusilla moan softly, with happiness, and her lips burned down on mine. There was a brief, sweet struggle and she vanquished me entirely. In battle she would have terminated me, but this combat was more delightful. Her strong, white fingers hovered around mine sex, while her mouth, with its prehensile tongue, fastened over mine mouth, to stifle the cries, as I jerked uncontrollably. I heard her laugh softly; her hands had magic in them.

"Olympias" she cried with passion, "when you are Queen, let me render up my life for you. For I do so truly love you".

"Hush, hush, speak not of death" I whispered, "say rather you will share mine bed".

"Until death claims me" she gasped, taking my head in her hands, she kissed me distractedly. "O, mine sister.....mine sister.....my love".

Later - and it was much later - we heard voices calling us. I made to move but Drusilla restrained my quivering body. "Nay, nay" she mumbled, "'tis but servants. Ignore we them this while, for our eyes will reveal to the Queen our trade".

"It may be important".

She groaned: "You say true. Let us even go".

We rose unwillingly, and restored our stolas; after which we walked on light legs to the Palace, still hand in hand.

The Queen looked up as soon we entered her cabinet. One look was enough, and we saw her eyes twinkle. "Olympias.....Drusilla, I have ordered a banquet to be prepared for ten days hence. Present will be the Royal Council and also Palace office holders. Likewise Morpasia". This was like a douche of cold water to Drusilla and I saw her tense. The Queen frowned: "Now, come, Drusilla. I know well you like her not, nor she you come to that. Yet she has not met Olympias.....".

"Who she hates".

"I know this, and the knowledge makes me sad" our mother said. "Yet, meet they must, and you, daughter, will not allow Morpasia's words to anger you". She leaned back in her chair, half-smiling, fingering idly her jewelled dagger, being the only person allowed to carry one in the Palace. "And you, Olympias, will likewise hold your valour and your tongue in check. This is a state occasion. I will have no brawls, no high words. I know well your spirit; and Morpasia's meanness of spirit towards you, who block her passage to the throne. Only Inanna knows why Morpasia's soul is so black. Yet she is my daughter likewise and there is some love left in my heart for her. She will try to bait you, Olympias. Rise not to it, for it would merely give her satisfaction. Heed my words now".

"It shall be as you say, mother".

"'Tis well". She smiled suddenly. "Now, go you and bathe and rid yourself of your perspiration. Then will we eat".

As we splashed about happily in the marble bath, I said: "She knew, of course".

"Of course" Drusilla said, surprised. "Is she not a maid? Now, for sure, you think not that the Lady Paula is simply her secretary?". Seeing my look she went into near hysterics. "In truth, I will call you Reyin Innocence! And is not the Lady Corinna, as well as on the Council likewise Mistress of the Wardrobe?". And when she had stopped laughing, she became serious. "But to have Morpasia here pleases me not. She is an evil bitch. As you will find, sweet Olympias. For there is no doubt that one day you will have to fight her for the throne".

"I fear her not".

"I would not expect you to do so. Yet she is a formidable adversary. Yet shall I fight by your side and so I know her measure well. She is a ferocious fighter but happily she will not move while the Queen lives. So you have time to perfect your skills. You will understand more after you have met her".

"To which encounter I look forward".

"Hmm! We will see" she smiled.

When the day came, and I met Morpasia, I could readily see why she was feared by all maids, high and low. She had a cold, patrician type of beauty, high-cheekboned, with rather deep-set, dark eyes. Whereas both my own Drusilla's lips, and mine own, were full, moist and mobile, Morpasia's were thin and cruel. The maid has not been born who could make me afraid (after all, one maid is as good as another) but I could see

well why she was feared.

Physically, Morpasia was the finest specimen of a maid I had seen. When she entered the banqueting hall that evening, in her golden stola and headress, she dominated the scene, not by her size but by the splendid condition of her body. She had broad hips, as is apt for our sex, but her waist was slim; and then there were her well-developed shoulder muscles and as she walked arrogantly, truculently towards us the gold cloth of her stola clung to her biceps. Her hands were white, be-ringed and strong, as indeed I found when after kissing the Queen and Drusilla, she gave me a perfunctory greeting.

If I dwell on her physique it is because bodily strength is to us as important, if not more so, than beauty. For obviously to be a warrior you have to be strong; and the stronger you are, the better warrior you are. It takes strength to triumph over another maid in combat. And I suddenly had a burning determination to one day be as strong as this sister who hated me so much. Indeed, I had to be.

"Olympias.....sister.....we have waited long for you. Welcome to Themis". Her voice was slightly husky, not unpleasing to an unprejudiced listener. I thanked her, responding after the fashion of maids. I kissed her cheek and there was a ripple of approval from the assembled magnates. When she had leaned forward to kiss me, her right hand had grasped mine arm, testing mine muscles, and finding me wanting. I bit my lip in vexation, and as she turned away she gave me a mocking smile. She crossed to the Lady Europyle and I heard them laughing together; and I went hot and cold by turns. As we sat down at the table, Drusilla whispered to me: "You see?". I saw.

At the banquet I sat on the Queen's left, Drusilla on her right. Morpasia sat next to Drusilla (and therefore opposite to me) and Corinna beside me, while Lady Europyle sat next to Morpasia.

It was a brilliant banquet. We ate off gold plate that was very old. The goblets were also gold, with rare stones inset; we drank our green wine that is sweet and heady. Then there were speeches of welcome, fulsome and sycophantic, from Court officials. I responded simply and sincerely. Then after the meal the Queen and we daughters sat in thrones on the dais, I on my mother's right hand as befitted the heir to the crown; Drusilla and Morpasia sat on the Queen's left. The company then filed past me (as the banquet was in mine honour) and swore fealty, kissing my hand. It was an ordeal, for although I could not see Morpasia, I could guess her thoughts. The Queen was likewise taut, but never less than Queenly.

Then, after the nobles had left, we sat at our ease for a while, drinking wine. Then was the Queen called away on some matter - I forget what it was - leaving we sisters alone. Drusilla suggested we walk in the garden, and as there was no point in not doing so, we agreed. It was very late, and the gardens were quiet.

"Olympias" murmured Morpasia, silkily, "I was indeed anxious to meet you, of whom I had heard much. I was much curious about you".

"Not unnaturally, dear sister" I murmured politely, yet I felt the colour rising in mine face. "I too was curious about the great Morpasia".

"Of that I am certain, sister" she replied, drily. "But tell me about surface people. They are strange, are they not?".

"They are not like us, that is certain".

"Surely it must be that you miss them".

"I miss them not at all". I saw Drusilla glance at me anxiously.

"Is it indeed so, sister? I marvel. For it is certain that you are no pure bred Amazon maid, but a mongrel bitch".

This was a quite deliberate insult, the placing of a quarrel. I heard Drusilla's sharp intake of breath, for she knew that in our society matters could only end in one way.

"You lie, sister" I flared, "mine blood is as pure as thine. Was it mine fault I was given to a surface woman? One day I will prove to you I am pure Amazon" and mine hand dropped to where my dagger normally hung.

"It pleases me to note that even a mongrel has spirit" she laughed lazily. "Yet were your blood pure you would know that a maid does not carry arms within the Palace".

I now saw her through a red mist of hate. Mine hand flew out and slapped her face, after the fashion of maids. And she, being stronger, returned the blow so that I reeled back, mine headress flying from mine head. Drusilla stepped between us: "Olympias.....Morpasia.....for shame, for very shame, that two sisters should so contend". I knew not but our lady mother, the Queen, watching us from her chamber window, was anguished. Now Morpasia put Drusilla by, roughly.

"Say you so, sister? The quarrel has been placed. Let her defend herself, 'an she can. Not now, for she is weak, unworthy of my valour; yet when occasion serves, I will slay her. Mark it well, Olympias. Make yourself a warrior, strong and valorous. I will not be accused of murdering a surface maid. While our mother lives I will do nothing. Yet when she dies, on that day you die, Olympias. No mongrel shall mount the throne of Amazonia, that I swear". Then she turned truculently to Drusilla. "And as for you, my young sister, as you stand with the mongrel, you will I also slay. My plans for Drusilla have long been known to you. I beg you not to fall alive into my hands on that day".

"Have a care, Morpasia" Drusilla blazed. "The account between us is long. Make it not longer".

"It will be settled one day bloodily, sister. You are worthy of my skill, this I know, and I know you will die bravely. But you will die, doubt it not. And I leave it to you to make your bedfellow as worthy as yourself".

"I shall live long enough to see her take your head, Morpasia".

Morpasia laughed, derisively; then she turned on her heel, watched by Drusilla and I.

I muttered: "By Inanna, she hates me well!".

"Ay, does she, for she has great appetite for the crown". She recovered mine headress, and restored it to mine head. "Yet there is one sister who loves you well, and will die in your interest".

"I know it well". I took her hand and forced a laugh. "Mayhap that is just as well".

"Ay, but she is right, Olympias. You must make yourself strong. Work hard at it, my love, for one day we shall have to face her, you and I".

"Rest easy, Drusilla. I had already determined on that course".

"Ay, but rest easy, Olympias. You have time. Our mother will live long. Now go we in to our bed".

It was about an hour after we had retired that I sat up suddenly and looked down at my love. "What meant the bitch when she spoke of her plans for you being long known?".

"Nay, nay" she murmured sleepily, "think not of it. You have much more to think about, it seems to me".

"Nay, Drusilla, I will not be put by".

She sat up then, and we nestled close. "Then you shall know all. Did you know the bitch came in full armour today? Ay, she did. Yet there was no need for she had her guards like any Reyin. 'Twas but to daunt

you. I tell you but to prepare you, for I would not have you discomfited. In the morning when she comes to make her farewells to the Queen, she will look magnificent, for to give the bitch her due, she is truly a great warrior". I squeezed her by way of thanks, and she went on: "But you ask of Morpasia and I. I think we were doomed for enmity from the moment I was drawn from the Queen's belly. Once" - she chuckled at the memory - "when children, I, though younger than she, smote her on the nose, from which blood gushed, and likewise water from her eyes. She ran to her mother, who having bunched mine little fist in her hand, laughed pridefully. So you will see, Olympias, that our enmity started early. And I know well what would happen to me did I fall alive into her hands, having been defeated in combat". And she said it with such grimness that I stared at her in surprise.

"What mean you, Drusilla?".

"Harken to me, Olympias. When I was hardly fifteen the Queen took me on my first raid. I had my own battle armour and was on fire to fight, to slay my first man - which, as you know, among us makes us recognised as a warrior. So the Queen led us against the primitives, whose land is two days journey from this city. There we had a short and merry engagement and I had the joy of pushing my sword through a man's body and I was thus a warrior. But I boast and I meant not this. When we marched, the Queen left Morpasia in charge of the city. You were still on the surface, and as the eldest daughter it was good that she had the experience of rule. Now, Olympias, we were absent for six days merely and in that six days Morpasia had wreaked such havoc that the city was in ferment on our return".

"What had she done?".

"You know it not, Olympias, but beneath the Palace is a dungeon, unused for centuries, for we do not rule by terror any more. In this dungeon is a central pillar and to it Morpasia had chained a maid, for a small enough fault, and her pleasure had been to unlock the maid's teeth with her dagger, one by one, and thereafter to rip her breasts to see the milk drain". My cry of horror, caused her to nod. "Ay, it was truly horrible. It would not, I suppose, have mattered that much had it been a plebeian maid, but it was an arms-bearing maid, a warrior, one of our own caste, and of an important family among the merchants, rich as a pepper-sack as the saying is. And there were other maids too, who had been whipped until the blood ran. So the city was in turmoil, and the cry was, 'Morpasia must be banished for ever'. Thus, the Royal Council met, and with them myself, and we did, with near-unanimity, the sole dissenting voice being Europyle, ever and always Morpasia's creature and supporter, thereupon banish her for ever. Yet, she being royal, the Queen would not allow it to be seen as a disgrace and thereupon created the office of Governor of the Satellite City which was granted to Morpasia in perpetuity. I did myself take Morpasia news of her doom and she laughed: "One day, Drusilla, I will serve you as I served that maid, for I have long promised myself that I would cut out your heart". And she called me a sweet-talking, sanctimonious little hypocrite, and such-like pleasantries".

I was appalled: "You jest, sister".

"Not I. Remember our Egyptian blood. Mayhap Seleucid also, I know not. I am a warrior, not a scholar. Yet Morpasia knows her history and how it was in ancient times. She can recite our descent through Queen Merina of Libya without error. I sometimes think she is a throwback to those times; Selene talks very learnedly of atavism. But I know not. I can fight and make love, but am no scholar. But 'tis enough for me. But I warn you, Olympias, if you ever have her at your mercy, take her head for until she is slain, Amazonia will know no peace".

"For this was I born" I remarked, with some bitterness.

"Indeed" Drusilla took my hand. "It is fine to be born into the royal house, for one has power. Yet that coin has an obverse. You need not doubt that you and I, sister, will die violent deaths. So says the sooth-sayers and I doubt them not. A Queen, a Reyn know this to be their fate, for they are the principal warriors of Amazonia. Yet what matters it? We are thus spared the infirmities of old age, the diminution of strength, the gradual loss of beauty. For me, and for you I doubt not, it is far better to die on the axe, honourably and with glory, rather than fade into a bag of bones and loose, hanging flesh. Nay, let me rather go to Inanna, with my breasts and flesh firm upon me. So, if Morpasia is marked to cut me down, why then, so be it. And if I can take the bitch with me, to the saving of your life, then shall I die happy".

I kissed her hungrily, being greatly moved by her words. And she, nothing loth, responded in full-blooded fashion.

In the morning we were with the Queen when Morpasia came to make her farewells. She came in magnificent (even as Drusilla had prophesied) and looking awesome in a splendid gold harness, and carrying her bascinet under her arm. She bowed to the Queen before kissing her.

"It was gracious of your Majesty to permit me to return to Themis for the banquet and to meet my sister, Olympias". The Queen inclined her head coldly, for she knew very well what was afoot. "I will now return to my post, if it pleases your Majesty".

"It does so, Morpasia. And as quickly as may be. You are not greatly loved in the city".

"I know it well, mother".

She kissed Drusilla and I cavalierly. "It may be that Olympias will walk with me to the Palace entrance". Drusilla gave me a warning look; I was immediately on guard. Yet it would have been churlish to refuse. As we walked she looked sideways at me, with a half-smile. "It may be that you think I was hard on you last night, Olympias. Well, I was, and quite deliberately. The quarrel had to be placed". We stopped and she placed her gauntleted hand on mine shoulder, gripping like a vice; her thumb bored into the flesh. It pained me but I declined to flinch. Her smile broadened: "Ay, I think you will do, sister, come time". Then bonhomie vanished. "This makes no difference, Olympias. I shall slay you. I have to. You stand in my way. I intend to have the crown and will brook no rivals. So work hard, sister". Now she smiled again: "I shall hear of your progress, for I have friends in Themis, powerful friends. Now, sister, you will oblige me so far as to place my bascinet and lock it". I seethed inwardly, but did so. The conical helmet made her look taller and more dangerous than ever. "One last word" she said hollowly, from within her casque. "And you may tell Drusilla. Enjoy your lives while you have them. For one day I shall snuff them out, ay, like a candle". And she turned and went from me. I stood massaging my shoulder until the feeling returned. Then I returned to the Queen and Drusilla.

The Queen knew what happened the previous evening, and was much angered. "My daughters" she cried, "were it in my power I would protect you from this danger. Yet while I live she will make no move. I cannot interfere in this matter. The quarrel has been placed and by our code.....". She was heard to choke on her rage, and her voice was freighted with bitterness when she added: "If I had known the fruit of my womb would be so evil, I would have strangled her at birth! It were better so".

"Nay, good my mother" Drusilla said soothingly. "Olympias and I fear her not. Yet Olympias must lose no opportunity to make herself strong".

"Ay, indeed she must. But that I should have been the unwitting means of bringing this on you.....'tis enough to make a mother's heart break. For I love you both dearly and the thought that you must face this when I am gone is a grief unbearable".

From now on I threw myself into the training with such vigour that my progress was rapid and according to Drusilla - who was almost certainly prejudiced - I grew in strength and beauty. Certainly I grew in strength, for there is nothing to increase muscle-power like wrestling and lifting iron weights, both of which formed part of the training programme. I stood before the reflective glass and admired mine physique; over the year it grew much like Morpasia's. Drusilla clapped her hands in delight and the Queen smiled happily, much relieved. And sometimes in the evening, as I was now so strong and formidable, Drusilla, Selene and I wrestled before the Queen, naked as our fashion is. Now Selene is a fine wrestler and to defeat her as I now sometimes did, was a joy, as also Drusilla. Wrestling among we maids is a violent exercise and a brutal, for no part of our bodies is exempt from use. Thus, many are the squeals of pain, but all was done in good comradeship, and afterwards, our bodies gleaming from long exertion, we laughed together, before plunging into the pool. So addicted to wrestling did I become that one day I asked the Queen if I might wrestle in the stadium against all comers. She choked: "Child, are you quite mad? The stadium is for the people, not for the royal house", while Drusilla nearly had hysterics. So I had to be content with wrestling within the Palace walls, for the Queen's delectation. "You gladden your mother's heart" she sighed. "You are as good as Morpasia ever was".

This is how it is for every Princess; she is insulated from ordinary life. This is the same in every society. Neither Drusilla or I could go into the city without guards. It was galling to us, being healthy young maids; yet we could visit the villas of the nobility without restraint, since they could be reached through the Palace gardens. Whatever indulgence, whatever wildness we sought could usually be supplied around the pools of the younger noble maids. Yet Drusilla and I longed greatly for the houses of disrepute by the city walls where one could eat, drink, quarrel, fight and - more seductively - make promiscuous love with the maids who plied for hire. I have said we were healthy young maids, with the usual needs and vices. Now, Drusilla's knowledge of the Palace was encyclopaedic, and one night in bed, as we played, she mused: "There is a way, Olympias. 'Tis quite an adventure, for we have to go through the clocae, and brave the filth and the rats. We should need our boots and it smells not very well". Seeing the flare of excitement in mine eyes, she laughed. "Yet, if you wish.....".

"Let us do it. It will be fun".

"Again that surface word!".

So one day when I had returned from the arena and a hard morning's training, we had a frugal meal with the Queen; then we almost ran to our chamber. Here we changed into the brightly coloured stolas of the people and belted on our daggers, as we were going into the city alone and there were no guards to protect us; and as you will hear, it was as well we were armed. Then we drew on our boots and carrying our sandals in our hands, crept stealthily along the corridor. In fact, all our precautions were unavailing, for our mother, curious at our anxiety to be gone from the table, set our good friend, the Lady Corinna, to watch us - who having watched us, with much kindly amusement, reported to the Queen, whose favourite she was. As we heard from Corinna much, much later, our mother had shed a little tear, smiled and murmured: "Ah, young maids! It reminds me much, Corinna, of what we did when we were young. I see Drusilla knows the secret way". That she did.

She unlocked a heavy wooden door, and passing through she re-locked it behind us. "Now, take care, Olympias. These steps are ancient and worn; they lead down to that dungeon I spoke of. 'Tis an awful place to be sure. Yet in the corner is a stone which gives entrance to the clocae". I raised an eyebrow, and she giggled: "It is here it gets mighty interesting, sister. Tuck your stola into your belt".

It was no problem for two strong maids to lift the stone but the smell was decidedly unpleasant. My nose wrinkled in distaste and she laughed at me. Leaning over the hole, she groped with her hands: "Ay, the rope ladder is still here. Morpasia used it I am told; she and Europyle". She looked up at me. "Remember the night of the banquet? She laid with Europyle that night, came straight from her to us to say farewell. You must walk warily before Europyle, Olympias. We both must. She corresponds with Morpasia, is her spy in Themis. The Queen knows it. Europyle is an enemy".

"Ay, she has often been at the arena, watching me train".

"You see? But come, sister. I will go first. You follow. It matters not about the stone. The door to the dungeon is locked". So we descended, and stood up to our ankles in the filth. Drusilla laughed: "We are lucky. Often it is deeper. We shall come to a confluence; we take the left fork". We splashed on in the semi-darkness for a space and I wondered if Drusilla truly knew whither she was bound. She did.

We heard the sound of little scurrying feet. "What is that?".

"Rats. They are more afraid of us than we of them".

"Drusilla, are you certain of that?!"

Her gay laugh bounced off the walls of the sewer. "Look upon them as so many Morpacias".

"Then I fear them not".

"'Tis well".

After what seemed an eternity we came to a short flight of steps that led to a platform above the effluent. It was quite dry. "We can leave our boots here" I was told, "and resume our sandals". This we did. When we were both ready she took mine arm and kissed me. "We are nearly there, Olympias. In that corner is a rope ladder. At the top is another stone. Once through that we are in a path between two houses. From there it is but a step. But look we out for danger, for 'tis a bad part of the city, where the plebeians do dwell".

It was that step that proved dangerous indeed. Unpleasant as the walk underground was, what came next was infinitely more unpleasant - yet in retrospective contemplation mighty satisfying, for we handled ourselves well, as two proud Reyins ought. We bent down and adjusted the leg straps of our sandals, when it happened. Turning into a mean little street, we had to pass two plebeian maids lounging against a wall. They stopped their talk, gazing upon our rich dress and our adornments; we regarded them not at all, for they were far beneath the military caste, and even more of the royal house. But this much we saw, that they wore the short dress, made of coarse cloth appropriate to their station; but what annoyed us was that they bore, tucked into their buskins, a long dagger. This was against the law for them. We passed them, disdaining their greeting. Drusilla sighed: "I like not to see plebeians apeing their betters. And saw you them making inventory of our rings and jewels? I think we have trouble". I was sure of it; I heard the stealthy steps behind us. "Draw your dagger and on the count of three turn and we will attend to this matter".

We did so and it was none too soon. Four daggers clashed together. It was a sweet little combat, but too short to savour. I parried the maid's savage thrust, leapt aside and before she could recover, lunged. She really had no chance with a trained warrior. Her mouth opened in a noiseless scream, as she dropped clutching her middle; blood poured from her mouth and she died. I had the leisure to watch Drusilla's dagger sweep upwards in a deadly arc; the maid fell, screaming the agony of her guts. We watched her die, then bent and cleaned our daggers on them and sheathed our weapons.

"Hm!" Drusilla smiled, "'twas our jewels for sure. Plebeian envy of their betters. And see what good it has done them. They are small loss. But let us be on the way. Time is wasting and the delights are to come". So we went and looked not back.

If I do not describe those delights it is because, as I remember surface people, erotic pleasure shocks them. And the games we played that afternoon, delectable though they were, were far from innocent.

The realities of life are that when you are Queen the days of freedom are over. Thus, while you are Reyin, you can be as wild as one wishes, but when the crown rests on your brow the situation is entirely changed. Much is forgiven a Reyin because it is well known that the cares of state are such that after her coronation, her days are not her own. Thus I make no apologies for what we did, or the life Drusilla and I led.

The house to which we were bound was unpretentious on the outside but within was luxuriously appointed, and much patronised by the nobility. For here was every kind of gilded vice that could be desired. The maids who were provided were indeed plebeian, but decently attired, and most beauteous. I chose the maid that pleased me most and departed to a private chamber; Drusilla likewise made her choice and retired to seclusion. But of this enough. Let me just assure you that the hours sped pleasantly. At the end of the afternoon I drew a ring from mine finger and tossed it onto the bed, where the maid grabbed it eagerly. A Reyin carries no coin, by tradition. When we go shopping in the city, it is one's lady-in-waiting who bears the purse.

On our return we noted that the bodies had been dragged into an alley and a dog was sniffing around them. We felt no pity for them; their intention had been that we should be laying there, our rings and jewellery stripped from us. A fine end for two Reyins! Drusilla took mine hand and squeezed it.

"'Twas well done, Olympias. That quick turn and lightning lunge - 'tis a trick I must learn. Ay, 'twas supremely well done".

"They were only plebeian" I pointed out, "not trained to arms as are we". I was aware of the contempt in mine voice. "It was no great matter. It seems to me that upwards sweep of thine is of equal worth".

"Ay, I have never known it to fail" she returned, proudly. "But I recognise you as a warrior in truth, and my comrade-in-arms. I do truly feel sorry for that bitch Morpasia when you face her". This was honey to mine ears as you may imagine.

Thus saying we descended again into the murky depths. Yet again we removed our sandals, and drew on our boots. I laughed, speaking of our afternoon's gambol and how much I had enjoyed it. "I doubt not that, Olympias". Then she too laughed. "Those two maids.....well paid for their service; yet a sorry sight, moaning and bleeding as they were. I fear me we are both rough wooers!".

We laughed uproariously under the influence of the wine we had quaffed. The feeling of omnipotence is like a drug; the scurrying feet of rats troubled me not a whit as we splashed our way merrily back to the Palace. We were still laughing when we reached the rope ladder and hauled ourselves upwards into the dungeon.

Yet later, when we dined with the Queen, as was our wont, we were as demure maids as you could wish to find. Yet our bodies sang still with our afternoon's trade. And the Queen asked not a word as to our doings, but gazed upon us tenderly and with much love.

The eldest daughter of any royal house has not the ordering of her days. Even in the few remaining, diminished monarchies on the surface it is so; although it is laughable to equate those monarchies with our own. I have already spoken of mine training in arms, into which after Morpasia's visit, I threw myself with determination. Then there is statecraft - how to rule a warrior people, how to lead them on raids, how to give judgements, and how to lay down your life for them if called upon to do so. I complain not about mine life. Most people in Themis had work to do, duties to perform. Selene did, Drusilla^{did}, while Palace duties kept most of the noble families employed.

However, a lot of noble maids, in common with other societies based on the principle of a privileged aristocracy, lead frivolous and indulgent lives. Yet on occasions such as I shall later describe they redeem themselves entirely. For they give, and give, and give yet again, until they have no more to give. They know their duty and do it with sublime courage and this excuses much. Thus, I love mine noble maids and their capacity for self-sacrifice; for, like their Queen, they are bred up to defend, and if necessary, die for Amazonia. And when danger threatens they fully justify their privileges. Of course, they do have excesses. They quarrel, they fight and have orgiastic tendencies. To all of this I turn a blind eye. It matters nothing to me as long as they are willing to lay down their lives for me. And they are.

Amazon maids are, almost without question, seductive when young. Indeed, when your distant ancestors (those known as Cro-Magnon) first appeared in the countries of the Ancient World and spread over Europe, it was the bodies of Neanderthal maids like us that they greatly coveted; and by them produced the hybrid stock that you now are. Mine relations with Drusilla and Selene may appear to you incestuous; but know that the word is not in our dictionary, only in yours. Yet I digress.

One afternoon in, I suppose, 1925 - ay, it must have been then, for I was in mine early twenties and Drusilla about twenty-one - when I was closetted with mine mother, after a hot, sweaty morning in the arena. She picked up a parchment from her desk and looked at me, in kindly fashion: "This is a report from the Chief of the Royal Guard, telling me of your progress. You have proved a most apt pupil, and the maid says she can teach you no more. I am much pleased, daughter". I flushed with pleasure and involuntarily flexed mine muscles. The Queen looked on me with pride. "Ay, you are brave, you are strong, my Olympias. You will make a fine Queen when I am gone. Yet am I troubled". She became serious. "You have met Morpasia. You know what faces you, as do I. Now, you have not yet been hurt - not seriously hurt. For your instructors, aware of your high station, have used you gently". I raised an eyebrow, and she laughed. "Ah, bruises are nothing. In learning to fight they are inevitable. But you know not what is involved in fighting a warrior like Morpasia - what will be involved. It will be cruel, Olympias".

I shrugged with unconcern. "I know it, mother. I fear her not. I have a goodly armour and she is but a maid, like I".

"You have a superb armour. More than one. But that is not the point and you know it well".

"I have been on raids, and fought by your side".

"Oh, raids!" she cried, disparagingly. "The patriarchals are nothing. True, maids fall before them sometimes but they are no preparation for Morpasia. Were it not for she I would not be troubled. You are a fine warrior. You love to fight and that is good". Her hand reached out. "It is not your courage, daughter. That is abundant. I know that when you meet, if you drop I know you will die bravely. It has often seemed to me, and, ay, the Council, that you think more of your personal honour than of the state. And that is not good. You must survive. And think of Drusilla. Morpasia will take her head if you fall. Remember it".

THE TEST

"And 'tis such a sweet head!".

Briefly my mother's eyes twinkled, then she was serious: "I would not wish to look down from Heaven and see it on a spear, Olympias".

"What may be done, mother?".

"You will think I am a harsh, unnatural mother, I doubt not. Yet no other Queen has had to leave her daughter in such a case. I must know if you can take wounds. Drusilla likewise but you more importantly. In your sister's case, there is hate to buoy her up when she joins you in battle with Morpasia. Yet you have little hate in you; this is the one defect I have noted in you. Mend it, Olympias".

"I will try, mother. I know well Morpasia is an enemy".

"That is she. And our greatest warrior. I have never known a greater. The knowledge that you will have to face her when I am gone near breaks your mother's heart. There may only be one Queen in Amazonia and it must be you, not only by right but by worthiness. Drusilla will be your good right arm but 'tis your life that Morpasia will seek. 'Tis you she must slay if she is to wear my crown. She will amuse herself with Drusilla after the battle, if she is not slain. Believe it".

"I believe it, mother, for Drusilla has told me of what Morpasia is capable. And what she has in her evil mind for my sweet sister".

"Well then! There must be a final test, to ease my mind. Inanna forgive me, that I should force this on your dear body, yet I must. You must know what it will be like facing Morpasia in battle, and what it is like to have your blood spilled. You are the future, the hope of Amazonia".

"Ay, mother. What has been decided?".

"I cannot order a maid to challenge you to mortal combat, for that is treason and she would lose her head. Nay, 'tis impossible. Yet I have spoken to Drusilla and she agrees with me that you must both have this experience. Both of you need it. Happily I have many years left but I must know before I die that you can sustain pain. 'Tis understood?".

Of course I understood. "What says Drusilla?".

"Your sister loves you well, Olympias. She is your bedfellow and it pleases me well. It is not with us as it is with the surface dwellers. To have two such daughters, so devoted, makes me very proud. Both of you are valiant, equal in skill and strength. Drusilla will don her armour and meet you in the chamber below the Royal Armoury. So it is arranged".

"I gladly accept, mother, since it is your wish".

"Ay, but mark me, Olympias. Drusilla will not spare you. So have I instructed her. I know you are lovers but once in armour you will be her enemy. Believe it, Olympias. When the first blow is struck, anger overtakes everything else. It will be so with her, it will be so with you, for you both have hot Amazon blood. And I will find means to supplement it". (Idid not know until many years had passed what she meant by this). "You will strain every nerve to slay each other. Yet you will not, firstly because your armour is so strong, and secondly because Selene will be there to see you do not terminate each other. She will also tend to your hurts. I would have asked Selene to give you this test, yet she is not of royal blood and it would be treason. Now, I have ordered Drusilla to fight like Morpasia. She has watched her in the arena and knows well her viciousness".

"Against which I shall be proof, mother" I said proudly. "I am likewise your daughter".

"I hope you may be, Olympias" the Queen nodded. "Yet Drusilla is eager for this meeting, for she knows she needs this harsh practice. I order you not to spare her, Olympias". Then suddenly her shoulders drooped

and I had to comfort her. "That a mother should have to order her two daughters to do this stabs me to the heart. But I must have you prepared in your mind for what must be; your courage is not in doubt. It is the toughness of your mind that I would know for certain. Yet no other Queen has had such a vile duty". She wept a little; then, as if ashamed of her weakness, she was strong again. "I think of the State, not of you. Any hurt you suffer is nothing, placed beside the safety of Amazonia. Pass this test and I can rest easy. Now, go".

This was the mother I loved, the warrior Queen in full command. I bent to kiss her but she put me by. She would not let me see her tear-stained face, this I knew.

I turned at the door. "Which day has been set?".

Without turning round she told me. "Two days hence. I have a duty to perform in the city on that day. I would not be here".

That night I spoke of the matter to Drusilla in bed. Her eyes danced with the love of battle I knew so well. "The Queen is right, Olympias". Then she became strangely subdued. "Yet I love you and wish not to hurt you. Yet shall I have to. I may not stop myself. You know well enough how it is in combat".

I smiled at her. "I shall hurt you by way of recompense".

She laughed joyously, then was silent for a space. "The Queen wept when she told me. I comforted her, saying you were brave. She knew it. Yet I understand her fears well. This has never happened before, civil war, sister against sister, maid against maid. Morpasia will have to die, my sister. Nor is it just us. It is the people. Many will die. Mayhap even I. I care little of that, if I may take the bitch with me. Yet the Queen is right. We have both fought in the arena, you and I; but this is nothing to the purpose. We know not battle conditions. We must do this thing. Yet be warned, Olympias; this is not just a passage of arms. We shall be accoutred as for war. And I shall seek to destroy you".

"I know it, Drusilla. There is no point in donning complete armour except for that. But remember, Selene will be there to stop us.....".

"Selene's orders are not to interfere unless we try to terminate, as in the passion of the moment we might".

"So! This will be a fight to remember, Drusilla". And we both laughed and clung to each other in love.

At this precise moment, although we knew it not, Selene was with the Queen, who said: "Selene, you are a noble maid, devoted to the Crown. Thus, I am entrusting you with a secret. Take your cloak, and go to the apothecary. Say you come from the Queen. Ask if there is a potion to stimulate hate. I know there is one, for in my mother's time it was much used by the gladiatrices, although I think its use has fallen into decay. If he asks for the quantity, say enough to make two goblets of wine. It will be in the form of a powder, doubtless. Then return to me here. Now, go". And Selene, liking not the trade, nonetheless went (as she was in duty bound to do) and returned. All this we knew not for many a year, for Selene, when it came to State secrets, was as quiet as the dead. Yet, when I was Queen, and Morpasia slain, she did reveal it to me privately, as we lay together. And I was much astonished thereby; and Drusilla likewise when I told her of it.

Thus, at the appointed time I met Drusilla in the long stone chamber below the Royal Armoury. We were both equipped as for war, having been armed by our ladies. Selene was already there, herself in armour. We both laughed at her, and she with us: "I may have to part you. I shall need it I fancy". This brought us down to earth somewhat and Drusilla and I became rather taut, especially when we regarded the preparations she had made - bowl, a flagon of water, and cloths.

Being hurt does not trouble us, for in our society it is commonplace but we knew we had to face facts. "Ah!" I said, smiling, "the realities of combat".

Selene smiled. "Ay, but first a present from the Queen to her brave daughters about to do battle". She produced two goblets, brimful of our sweet, green wine. We were grateful, for before combat the throat always gets dry with the thrill of the risk one is about to incur. The wine burned our throats as it went down; this was unusual, and both Drusilla and I raised our eyebrows.

Almost immediately something happened. Now, I love every inch of Drusilla's body (and she mine) yet suddenly I detested her. I paid no heed, thinking it was the normal mental preparation for combat, the necessary readjustment to face possible extinction. We spoke not but looked upon each other coolly. This strange alchemy is at once exciting, yet chilling; when we are in this state we could drink blood! This is what makes us fine warriors, without fear. I suppose it is recklessness, aggression, a willingness to be slain rather than face defeat. Forgive me, but it makes us proud. Yet this was something entirely different. Mine cheeks burned and we looked upon each other, with burgeoning hate.

I can best explain this change in both of us as a dark cloud in the mind. Yet we were not aware of the change, not then. We had forgotten our love. We were now enemies, and our hate was bitter and without frontier. I could see the bloodlust in Drusilla's eyes and gave back what she gave me. Selene said later that the malice chilled her. Well, mayhap.

Selene helmed me first. The lock clicked shut and I was fully enclosed. I reached for mine gauntlets, keeping mine eyes on Drusilla through the slit in mine bascinet, for I trusted her not at all. I knew it would be tough, but I intended to destroy her. Mine muscles seemed to swell with longing. How could I have thought her lovely? Her lips seemed strangely thin, like Morpasia's and her eyes scorched me. Once equipped for war, something happens to us. Our blood sings and our sinews crack with a desire to kill. It is how we are trained, 'tis how we are. There is no white blood in Amazonia. We have, I suppose, a masochistic streak. At least so says Selene. But she analyses too much.

Selene turned to Drusilla, carrying her bascinet, but she was put by. When mine sister spoke, her voice was thick with passion. "Fight well, Olympias. For I intend to slay you".

I was angered. "You brag, Drusilla" I shouted. "'Tis you who will fall". I heard her harsh, contemptuous laugh.

She then allowed Selene to helm her. I heard the click as the helmet was locked to the neck armour. Selene handed us both a ridged mace and mine heart seemed anxious to break from its confines. We approached each other eagerly; and then it started. When I took her first blow rage blazed in me, as mine mother had said it would, and I attacked her with great savagery. I tell you true, until I met Morpasia in battle I was to know nothing crueller than this fight.

Selene says that our cries echoed in the chamber. I cannot recall, nor can Drusilla. We know we wanted to kill each other. We know too that we bled, and the blood merged with our sweat. One fierce blow caused my nose to explode, or so it seemed. Again, Selene said I roared with pain and fury; I know not but I do remember unleashing an attack that had Drusilla retreating, hurt, her mace lowering. And because she seemed quite incapable of giving back blow for blow I struck her unmercifully. Her knees were buckling when from somewhere she found strength to make a last rally. I took a mighty blow on the front of mine bascinet, just above the eyes, and I knew no more.

The next thing I knew was that mine head was cradled in Selene's lap. I had been unhelmed, and I could feel the coldness of her armour against

mine burning head, and it was good, for it throbbed prodigiously. She caressed mine bloodied face, and I was pleased thereby. The blood poured from the wound on my forehead, nearly blinding me, then down mine nose, and warm and sweet on mine lips, from whence it dripped from mine chin. And this was but my most visible wound, for I could feel blood on my scalp and my hair was heavy with it. I hated Drusilla yet. I opened mine eyes with difficulty and saw that Drusilla lay still, half on her side, half on her face. And I joyed to see blood dripping from the ventilation holes of her bascinet. The bitch was wounded likewise and my spirit sang. I asked if she was slain, hoping with all my being that she was.

Selene laughed softly: "Nay, she swooned after she had cut you down. Only her great spirit kept her fighting, for she is much hurt. I tell you true, Olympias, the Queen will be proud of her two daughters, for either of you can face Morpasia without fear". I was grateful for this, and looking up, tried to smile; yet I groaned instead, for my face hurt, as did every part of me, while mine muscles ached.

Then there was a fluttering sigh and Drusilla moved feebly. I heard her moan, and try to raise herself. But she fell back, moaning in distress. And for the first time, pity entered into me, flushing away the hate I had felt. I looked around me, wondering greatly how I could have so hurt the thing I loved. I croaked mine grief, and Selene bade me soothingly: "Hush! dearest Reyin. You thought she was Morpasia. The Queen wished you both to know what it would be like to meet your wicked sister in battle. Now you both know". And she added cryptically: "The hour has now passed". I was in too much pain to give heed properly to her words.

She laid me down gently and went to Drusilla, unhelming her. As she removed the bascinet blood dripped from it. Returning to me again, she raised me so that I might look upon mine sister, and she on me. Drusilla's eyes were open, pain-wracked yet mild. Her face was much hurt yet around her swollen lips a smile hovered. They were full, moist and seductive lips, as ever. How could I ever have thought them thin and cruel? "Olympias" came her croak, "you are a great warrior. I could barely contain you. Content you, you were laid low by a lucky blow, a desperate blow. Our mother may rest easy. You can slay Morpasia when that terrible day comes".

What happened next I know not. I swooned. Selene says she called servants and we were carried to our chamber, where she stripped us. Then Egeria was called, who batted not an eyelid but tended our wounds. We lay together, Drusilla and I, holding hands; love flowed between us in balm-like currents. Yet a while before we had sought each other's life.

Then came our mother, who, seeing us as we were, controlled herself with an effort, as we did see. Her eyes were moist as she bent and kissed us both. "Faith, mother" muttered Drusilla, "you need have no fear. Morpasia is a dead maid if she faces Olympias. Great Queen, for you I have been to Tophet. Send me not again. I hanker not to face Olympias in combat a second time". And she squeezed mine hand.

The Queen turned to Selene, still in armour. "What say you, noble Selene?". They exchanged a secret glance, which I did not then understand.

"It was like watching a battle of the Titans, my Queen. I have never seen such savagery. The Crown is in safe hands. Were I Morpasia, I would sue for peace".

"'Tis well, and I thank you for your good offices, Selene. Your Queen is in your debt". Then to me she said softly: "I rest easy, my daughter. You now know what it is to face a warrior like Morpasia, and there will be no more tests. You have acquitted yourselves nobly. I wish I could have seen it, this fight; for you are the finest warriors in Amazonia".

Drusilla and I were in bed for seven of our days, as mine sister says "counting our bruises". Naturally, there was more to it than that. Even with our thickly padded leather suits, which we wear under our armour, you could not escape hurt. While these soaked up much of the violence it was against reason to expect to be unscathed. Yet we are always inordinately proud of wounds and bruises; again the masochistic syndrome.

It is often a waste of time to belabour an opponent's body; it is so well protected that the expenditure of energy is wasted. Therefore it is the head that receives the most attention; even here the triple plate and thick padding, not to mention the thicker skulls with which we are blessed, render really serious injuries rare.

Thus, it was a tribute to our great skill and strength that both I and Drusilla had bled profusely from head wounds; and we took great pride in each other as brave warriors. It never occurred to us that our brutalities to each other had been directly attributable to a potion of great virulence. Our wounds were naturally superficial, for our helmets were stout, yet we had scars. Mine was on mine forehead and I feared greatly that I would be disfigured for life. The Queen laughed: "Worry not, daughter. 'Twill heal". It did; but even after a month the wound was tender. Egeria inspected it one day, her eyes twinkling: "Hmm! Had you been a surface maid, you would be dead, Reyin!". It was true. Mine sister's last blow had been fierce indeed, with all her considerable strength behind it.

Drusilla held me close one day, kissing mine scar. "What came over us, Olympias? I love you so, yet I injured you. Say you forgive me".

"Fool!" I laughed, fingering gently her own scar under her dark hair. "Did I not cruelly hurt you? Besides it was a wonderful fight. And the Queen was right. I needed the experience, for unlike you I have never seen Morpasia in combat. I now know what it will be like; and I know I can slay her".

"Ay, she is a fearsome opponent". Then she laughed lightly: "Tell me, what would a surface maid do in a like case?".

I laughed heartily at this: "Why, hide behind her skirt. Or run screaming and shelter behind her man".

"How despicable! Have they no pride? No honour? No guts?".

"None, yet pity them, sister. They are the product of their environment. They are not bred up to it as are we. Their chiefest achievement would be to slap another maid's face!". She giggled. "You see, Drusilla - and I speak of what I know, as you are aware - any combative spirit is drubbed out of them as being unmaidenly. Or, as they say, unwomanly or unfeminine. Thus, they sit around waiting for a man to claim them, lay them and impregnate them with his seed. That is a surface maid's life. They know nothing else. Within the narrow framework of their life, they are happy enough. Or think they are".

"And they are all like that?". Drusilla was incredulous.

"All - except those who we recruit to serve us. They are virtually as we are. We see to it that they are. We have no use for white blood, for cowardice".

Soon we were about again, immersed in the pleasures common to maids. And indeed life in Themis is very fine, a succession of entertainments in Forum and arena. Ay, life is very good. Sometimes we frequented the stadium, for wrestling is very popular with us. It is beautiful to see glistening maids striving for victory with great courage; and there are few fatalities. In all my life I have only seen one neck broken by a too energetic throw and on one occasion, in a particularly brutal contest, a maid had her muscles ripped from the arm. Wrestling forms part of training for war; every maid undertakes it from a very early

age. Even the Queen is so trained; it is necessary that she must exceed in strength, skill and courage, those she leads.

Yet there are entertainments appealing to the mind rather than the body. We have no amphitheatre, primarily because our site is restricted but also because it was associated with the Greeks, who were the enemies of our sisters of the Eastern Confederation. When an ancient play is staged, or indeed any play, it is done in the Forum with the royal family in thrones in the pillared entrance and the courtiers, resplendent in Court dress, on the steps. We really do prefer the ancient plays of our people, although occasionally a surface play is produced. Possibly these lose something in the translation into our tongue, but are always well received. Our taste runs more to raciness (such as in the English Restoration playwrights) than to strictly classical plays. We do have our own contemporary writers of plays although I have to admit that the more prolific of them, are less talented!

As I was a Reyin, and not only Reyin but heir-apparent, my training for Queenship was strict. I had much belaboured mine mother for permission to lead a raid on mine own but she would always reply: "Child, the time is not yet". At which I would become petulant and she would laugh, begging me to be patient, and that she would tell me when. And in our society the mother is 'Queen of the House' and thus much revered and not to be denied; raised in discipline this is natural to us. This is, I understand, much in contradistinction to surface maids, who are often not to be controlled, being allowed too much freedom. They even argue with their mothers, rejecting advice; such behaviour among us would produce a buffet to the face from our mothers, whose strong right hand is much respected. Yet it would never occur to us to do so. And if this is so with the common run of maids, how more true is it among the noble families, and even more so (if that is possible) in the royal house, where one's mother is Queen indeed.

Our play with other noble maids of our age is indeed indisciplined and far from innocent; this is even encouraged, for the sweet fruits of the bedchamber are the birthright of every maid. And I have to admit that we are quite shameless, for smooth skin calls to smooth skin, whether in the privacy of the bedchamber, or in luxurious indolence by the side of pools in villa gardens. It is delightful to hear, the falsetto cooing, that ends in sighs, gasps and moans. Yet when one's mother sends a servant to tear us from our delights, it is unthinkable not to rise on the instant and take one's throbbing body to her who has the right to command you.

Thus, when one evening, in the year after the fight I have recounted above, I was in the throes of lusty love with a certain highly born maid (who must be nameless) and a servant came seeking me, I rose on the instant, stopping only to cover mine nakedness with mine stola, before speeding to mine mother's cabinet. And she, seeing mine flushed face and shortness of breath, knew well mine trade, and smiled tenderly, remembering her own youth. It was, by the way, the month of Mesore.

"Olympias" murmured she, leaning back in her chair, idly playing with her jewelled dagger, "'tis time you led a raid on your own". Mine eyes must have sparkled, as any warrior Reyin's would, for she laughed. "I fear me it will not please you, daughter. There is nothing here to stir your blood and prick your valour. 'Tis not really a raid, more of a scientific expedition. Yet a Queen, and therefore a Reyin, has many duties, some palatable, some not so palatable. Our deposits of the ore known as manganese grow low and our metallurgists are worried greatly. A deputation from their guild has but this moment left me, and I have promised them I would send you, my daughter, whom they sought with most fulsome flatteries, in command of an expedition to seek other deposits. Our scientists say there are other deposits in a valley five leagues to the north. 'Tis there I send you".

I lifted mine lack-lustre eyes to hers. "It shall be as you say, mother. We go to guard the geological maids in their quest?"

"Ay, even so. And who knows, valorous Olympias, what dangers you may encounter on your way! Some of you may even leave your bodies by the way. For it is said that this valley is part of the territory of a tribe of men hostile to our sex and our race. So make your preparations accordingly. Take Drusilla and Selene with you for comradeship and lean much on Selene's wisdom. Give heed to her advice for she is a worthy maid, and a noble, of sound counsel. For you are yet young and your heart much set on brave deeds, as is proper to your age".

"Nay, good mine mother, you have taught me well. Trust me; I will find the ore if it is there. And if it is, we must garrison the valley until the supply is exhausted".

"You say truly, Olympias". The Queen nodded, approvingly. "For we can make no treaty with these creatures, for had we not our armour, our throats - your throats - would be speedily slit. We must secure the valley, come what may, if the ore is there".

And so it indeed happened. Now, five leagues is, in your terms, fifteen miles, and thus much food had to be taken. This implied a cart, pulled by plebeians. The whole business was a sore cross for us to bear, watching the geological maids attacking the rock face and staring at chips of rock as if they were the rarest jewels. I placed guards, like any good commander, and the rest of us spent our time playing games of chance, dice and the like, yawning mightily. On only one occasion did we have the trouble we yearned for.

There was no trouble on the first day, but at dawn on the second day there was a scream, and one of the guards I had set rolled down the hillside, an arrow stuck fast in the eye slit of her bascinet. I swore. Jumping up I marshalled the maids into a long line and we charged up the hillside, swords drawn. We received many arrows and Drusilla gave a homeric laugh as they clattered from our armour. Then we were among them, sword against spear. In the light from our camp fires we could see the wild men, large enough, but deficient in all but brawn. I heard a grunt as nearby a maid went down, an iron spear crashing against her neck armour; but she was up again in an instant. The men were poor creatures indeed, savage indeed; then we were among them, and we slew every one.

"Faith, that was needful" Selene laughed in her quiet way, flicking blood from her sword, "ennui was setting in".

"That it was" Drusilla supplemented, going around finishing off any who had life in them. "Yet disappointing. Nary a bruise to show. Remember our fight of last year, Olympias?". I did, and we laughed together.

I called for torches and with their aid we found a cave through which the men had gained access to the valley. I called to me a maid who carried a laser weapon. "Block me that entrance, maid". Which done, we returned to our games of chance.

Later, Selene looked past me. "What of our dead comrade?"

"She is beyond our help, Selene" Drusilla laughed. "Let the poor maid lie where she has fallen. Is she not a warrior?"

I smiled to myself at my sister's hardness. Yet she was right. Death is the lot of all warriors; and once one falls, your importance is very small. "Ay, Drusilla has the right of it" I remarked casually, "when we leave we will put her in the cart and deliver her to her family".

It took the geologists two more days to find the manganese, at the far end of the valley. It was a rich deposit. We were all glad to leave the valley, for our food supply was getting low and we all hankered for the fleshpots of Themis. Not to mention a bath, for we had lived and slept in our armour for five whole days. I watched the plebeians lift our dead

maid and toss her - ay, toss is the word - into the cart, for plebeians care less for us than we do for them. They knew well enough that if one of them had stopped an arrow, I would have unhesitatingly left her to rot among the rocks of the valley. But an arms-bearing maid is quite another matter. And so we returned to Themis.

Since that day that valley has been worked by the plebeians and we maintain a small garrison there to protect the toilers in the mine. It is not a posting sought after but as it is necessary to Amazonia it is done.

As for mineself I never returned to that valley; and I have spent time on the matter merely to explain to you the various things that someone of royal blood is called upon to do. Our lives are spent in service to the state, an unquestioning service. It is not all privilege and orgy, yet we are entitled to both, for in the last analysis, if it is called for, we lay down our lives for our people.

The thought of fighting the monsters, not singly as we did in the arena, but as many came against us, occurred to me one night while we were watching the gladiatrices fighting in the arena. This is never less than exciting to us; they are brave and the combat murderous. It must have stirred my own valorous soul. That which Drusilla, Selene and I were to do on the valley floor has since become fashionable among young maids to prove themselves. Mine own daughter has done it, as have most other noble maids. When I turned to Drusilla, looking pretty as a picture in her stola, trimmed with gold, she gurgled with delight. Even Selene was moved by the idea, but as she said, the Queen would have to approve. Drusilla gurgled: "I can handle our Queenly mother". Well, she could.

I was of course heir-apparent and in other societies I would never have been permitted to take such risks but in our society courage makes one more popular than ever, for it is to us an indispensable quality. I was by now a recognised as a warrior, and hailed as future Queen. I had killed men in our periodic raids and had fought in the arena and slain mine opponent. Before I proceed to the monsters, this combat has to be related because it has a connection with what ultimately followed.

THE MONSTERS

One happy evening in the Palace, we had been sitting listening to a maid with a sweet voice sing some of the old songs of our race - songs of war, songs of love, songs of Faith - when a maid called Glycera came up to me and in open Court slapped my face very hard. Among us, as in patriarchal societies at one time if not now, this is a challenge; I immediately rose from mine seat and gave her the challenge back. Drusilla pushed herself between us, laughing: "A challenge fairly given, and fairly met".

"Ay, 'tis so" mine mother said, very displeased, "and will be answered tomorrow in the arena".

As indeed it was. But was I puzzled, and the gasps of the courtiers indicated that they too were puzzled. I had always spoken the maid fair, she being one of the lesser nobility. She was a pretty thing, but strong, with well-muscled shoulders, as we all have by dint of warlike exercises; she also had a reputation for viciousness, which worried me not at all, for when called upon, I can be as vicious as any. Combat concentrates the mind wonderfully. Later that evening, mine mother shrugged and remarked: "One maid is as good as another. And Olympias, being royal, a match for Glycera". So I was indeed, but that was scarcely the point, but it was a remark common to Amazon mothers. For we are a quarrelsome, bellicose people, and such encounters a commonplace.

It was later - much later - that I realised it was her kinship to the Lady Europyle that was the cause of the challenge and ultimately led back to Morpasia. For Morpasia had a great appetite for the throne and I was a block on her road to it. She had stimulated Europyle, always her creature, to have me killed, and Europyle, the traitorous bitch, had stirred up her young kinswoman to challenge me.

When we fight in this way, it is a fight to the death. It has to be; and I knew well that either her blood or mine would stain the sand of the arena. In these fights one does not dress in complete armour, for this would make a conclusion impossible. We each wore a plumed helmet, carried a round shield, and fought with a sword. We also wear metalled gauntlets to protect our hands; among our race we have always used the mitten type, with hinged plates, never separately fingered. The sword has a long blade, but a short hilt, just long enough to take the hand; it is easy to control and becomes an extension of the hand. One's whole body is open to wounds, providing one can get past the shield. This is not as large as we use in war, but useful enough in the hands of a skilled maid.

The news of the challenge had gone round the city like a bush fire and the arena was crowded, every stone seat occupied. Drusilla had kissed me and placed the bronze helmet on mine head. "Have a care of her, Olympias."

She will kill you if she can. And Morpasia must not mount the throne. Your Drusilla is a dead maid if she does". Since we were lovers she knew well her words would make me fight hard.

We both entered from different gates and met in the centre of the arena. Both of us made obeisance to the Queen, where she sat among the Royal Council, who were gravely concerned lest I fall. Then Glycera and I faced each other. You could have heard a feather drop as Selene said afterwards; the people were completely hushed as their Reyin fought for life. Drusilla says you could hear our sandalled feet in the sand as we circled each other, seeking an opening. The Queen was anxious but you would have never known it from her face; she was Queen after all, the mother of her people. Yet I know that her bosom swelled pridefully for she loved me much.

Suddenly Glycera leapt in. I should have been prepared but I was not. I only partially parried her blow with the shield, and I felt mine skin tear. It was not much of a wound, but I was bleeding profusely. I was angered and attacked her ferociously; in the flurry of blows her sword struck mine sword hand. Protected, it hurt me not. She snarled at me. "You die, Olympias". I assured her it would take a better maid than she. Yet I tell you true, she was a doughty fighter and for twenty of your minutes we grimly sought each other's blood; yet we were equal in skill and strength. I had a minor success. Mine sword pierced her throat, not deeply, but the sight of her blood and her squeal of pain pleased me. Then, quite suddenly, I saw the opening I had long been seeking and I lunged, all my weight behind the sword. It went through her body until the hilt slammed against her ribs. "Damn you, Olympias" came the agonised whisper, "I am slain". Well, I could have told her that.

I enjoyed every second of mine victory. The satin skin glistened with sweat, her eyes dilated, her mouth slackened and her head jerked back in agony. There was a noiseless scream as I withdrew the blade; her blood gushed and she died. I watched her crumple, almost curiously; her left leg was upreared but her right drove a track as it sank limply. She jerked a little, then lay still. I will always say that Glycera, though an enemy, was a brave warrior.

The arena erupted into applause. I was deafened. Then one cried out: "Her head, take her head". It was taken up, this cry, spreading all around the arena. Unwilling, I looked up at mine mother; she nodded. I had a glimpse of Europyle's face, thin-lipped, dark with rage. I went down on one knee beside Glycera. I unlaced her helmet and drew it from her. I stared into the lifeless jelly that had once been her eyes and knew mine reluctance was foolish. The maid was already safe with Inanna. This was merely a useless husk, soon to be rendered into ash. So I struck the head from her shoulders and held it up for the people to see. They roared their satisfaction at the death of the maid who had presumed to challenge their Reyin. "Hail to the brave Olympias!". I bowed, then dropped the head into the sand.

Guards came and dragged the body away, and Europyle came and took possession of the body and that very same hour had it cremated and the ashes urned. Her congratulations to me were purely formal and I knew that if she could have done so, she would have struck me dead. I went tiredly to mine mother, once I had been cleansed of blood, and she took me to her arms. "Brave daughter! Gallant maid!". As for Drusilla, though she kissed me, as did Selene, her eyes said to me very clearly: "I will pay homage in bed", as indeed she did, that very night. Yet Europyle's eyes worried me; they had been coldly furious. I knew I had an enemy. But enough of this for now; we return to the monsters.

Over supper I asked the Queen about the monsters. She told me what she knew, which was not much. But I persisted, and while Drusilla refilled my goblet with our green wine, she leaned back in her chair with an indulgent smile, not knowing what we had in mind.

"If you would know more about the monsters, you must seek out Antonia, the Keeper of the Records, for it is she who has studied them, for she knows much of them and - as she believes - their distant cousins on the surface".

"Ay, in truth" Selene remarked, "for she has devoted her life to study and on the surface she would be hailed as a historian or even an archaeologist".

"True, Selene" the Queen responded, "and now I bethink me, early in my reign I did lead my people on a raid along the tunnels to the north-west, carrying Antonia with us, seeking replacements for dead gladiatrices, and I mind that we came to a large chamber which contained nothing but skeletons of a huge length. And Antonia let out a squeal of delight and beseeched me to leave her there to study them, which I did. I had it in mind to leave her to her protection two guards, but they liked it not for they sought action greatly, as is usual with my people. Yet Antonia, with her measuring line, took no heed of anything except the bones; I had to shake her by the shoulder before she would take note. Then did she say that she needed not guards, being a warrior, and feared not the spirits of the long dead. And indeed she was a brave warrior in her day, although now one would not know it. And so we went on our way, and on our return found her still making measurements of the walls and marveling greatly at the stone of the chamber".

"Did she reach any conclusions?"

"It sticks in my mind that she submitted a treatise on the matter. And yet I remember not the burden of it, for it was many years ago. Yet it must still lie in the archives. For the monsters, I know merely they provide us with leather and sport; for skeletons I care little. Yet I know Antonia was greatly excited".

"Ay, indeed" Selene supplemented, "for such reasons have we let the monsters breed unhindered over the centuries, for we need the skins of their bodies for the suits we wear under our armour, boots and other items of apparel, our tanners being mighty skilled". She paused for a space, then continued: "But as to the skeletons, Antonia's view is that the skeletons belonged to the race that made the tunnels, which are a wonder. For they are a veritable labyrinth, and, moreover, made of worked stone, laid so finely that a sword blade will not pass between them. Yet they are without mortar, which is truly a marvel; for our power staffs can destroy rock, yet leave it in a vitrified state, like crystal, smooth to the touch. Antonia calls this race the Titans and she claims that even on the surface are cyclopaean structures bearing testimony to their passing. Also bones such as your Majesty found. All this must you ask her, Reyin".

"Ay, that you must" Drusilla nodded. "Sometimes I spend time with her, and it is a mighty profitable exercise. Our world is restricted, yet it is meet that we know as much of its history as may be gleaned. Most of us have little inclination for scholarly studies, yet it is good that Olympias should spare the time".

"So go you, daughter" the Queen smiled, "for as well as brave, as I know you to be, I would have you learned also. And do it now, while you are yet Reyin, for when you are Queen, you will not have the ordering of your days".

By this time I had completely forgotten Glycera, her death; and I could never feel sorrow for it. For I had had the fight forced upon me, and death is a risk every warrior takes in combat. And I had a sweeter combat to engage in that night, when Drusilla and I made maidenly love in bed, to both our contentments. "And you may leave the Queen to me, Olympias" she whispered, just before she gave a shuddering moan and swooned quite away. I laughed, and covered her young breasts with kisses.

So when the new day dawned, and Drusilla and I had splashed about happily in the Palace bath, we went our separate ways, she to the Queen to wrest permission from her for our venture, and I to the Hall of Records.

I found Antonia to be white-haired, grave, yet possessed of the skill to learning as exciting as battle; which is a quality not often to be found amongst us. She saw me approaching, the light from the windows falling upon me. Now, I knew I looked very well indeed as Drusilla had told me so; and the reflective glass had confirmed it. Mine hair was dark and placed against the white stola, trimmed with gold, and with a wide gold belt from which hung a jewelled dagger, I felt the omnipotence that high rank gives. Even the lacings of mine sandals were gold and I truly looked as fair a maid as you could wish to see. Moreover, news of mine slaying of Glycera had gone before me, and I basked in it as I am told maids on the surface do, shamelessly unclothed, in the sun. The Hall of Records is long, and Antonia had much time to regard me.

She had looked up, at first irritated by the interruption to her studies. Yet seeing who it was, gratification took the place of irritation and she greeted me as a loyal maid should, carrying mine bejewelled hand to her lips. There was a brief murmur of congratulation on my deed of the previous night, to which I nodded graciously. Then she asked me what my will was.

"The monsters.....the tunnels.....and the earlier race" I informed her, sitting before her.

I saw the flare of surprise in the old eyes and I saw in their depths astonishment that one who by common report spent her time indulgently should be interested enough in her disciplines as to come seeking knowledge. I looked around me at the great chamber, lined by rolled parchments, some I could see, of great age. The place smelled, as all such places do - that is to say, musty and antiquated. I smiled, and she too.

"You are most welcome, Reyin, to my cabinet. For such it is, in effect, since most maids have no great appetite for learning, being much given over to the sweet fruits of love and the clash of arms". I smiled at the thinly-veiled reproof. "Yet I am a warrior, or was, and when younger fought much; but now study and the pushing out of the horizons of understanding please me more".

I nodded impatiently. "And the monsters?".

She leaned back in her chair and pressed her fingers together. "The monsters first then. And you do well to ask. Of one thing we can be sure. They were here when our ancestors came to this place. By their drawings and our observations we know they have not changed materially in all that time. They measure, on average, 1.65 to 1.75 metres in height. That is, much taller than we; to us they are awesome and powerful. This is why our maids like to use them to test their warlike skills".

"And they are ferocious".

"Ferocious? Ay, ferocious enough. Most of our people feel they have enmities towards us especially, conferring upon them reasoning capacities thusly. I believe this not to be the case. And I have good reason for thinking this. The maid on the surface who serves us sent me a reference dating from their year 1920 wherein such a creature was killed by one of their expeditions. I can even show the Reyin". And she did show me and I was impressed.

"So they have them in the surface world likewise?".

"It would so appear. Yet they knew not of them, as you will see. It causes me to speculate. The place they found them was not far from the ancient island of Atlantis, where our ancestors first saw them".

"You think?"

"In those days, Reyin, there was a landbridge between Atlantis and what they now call South America, where this creature was found. It is more than possible.....you understand?".

"That is possible. I have heard such creatures referred to as gorillas".

"That is very true, Reyin. There are several species of these large monkeys on the surface but none as long as our monsters, nor as vicious I think".

"That is true".

"For if you will compare the behaviour of the monster described as being found on the surface with our own, you will find it identical. You have seen them scream with rage, jump up and down, beat their chests and use anything to hand as weapons and, in our case, projectiles. For they throw rocks as you will know".

"Indeed".

"And sometimes I am troubled by their numbers. We need them for our own purposes, it is true, but.....". She was silent for a space. "If, some night, you stand on the city walls and listen, you may hear screams. And they are not animal screams. They are screams such as surface maids might make - you know, the Cro-Magnons, our supplanters. It makes me wonder if the monsters have a rudimentary intelligence and have found a way to the surface in search of meat, for they are carnivores. I remember, many years ago, hearing one of our hunting parties say that they found female skeletons in those caverns. Not skeletons of our maids, but long-shanked like those of the surface-dwellers".

"This hardly matters to us, Antonia" I remarked coolly. "Remember, for some years, against my will, I lived among them. I have no pity for their tribe, for their women as they call them. They let men use them, make slaves of them, tread them beneath their feet. Speak not to me of pity for surface dwellers. Let the monsters have them, if they do. Tell me rather of the long skeletons you found, as I hear, many years ago".

It had been many years since Antonia had been spoken to so imperiously, but she recovered quickly. "The skeletons? These must be the very ancient race that created the tunnels. Our ancestors heard of these people in Atlantis as having lived in the continent to the west. The learned ones of Atlantis called them proto-people; but my discovery must mean that they were generally distributed over the world. Whether the tunnels mean that conditions on this cantel, as we say, or planet as the surface people have it, were so hostile that they had to live under the earth, I know not. No one does; not even the scholars in that same western continent that the Atlanteans told us of, where similar discoveries have been made, as I hear tell. But I tell you, Reyin, these skeleton were prodigious, as you will yourself see if you march that way. The male skeletons measure 2.40 metres, and the female skeletons slightly less. The thickness of the skulls, too amazed. The men's were two and half centimetres; and the femur as long as a surface man's leg. The condition of the teeth, which were in situ, led me to believe that they were cannibals".

I was appalled. "Now I bethink me, Antonia, in those years I was on the surface I read in their holy book something to the effect that 'there were giants on the earth in those days'. Yet I believed it not, thinking it a fable. Yet it must indeed have been true. What manner of people were these? What would they have looked like, clothed with flesh? And what kind of internal life support systems had they to carry that vast weight?".

"Undoubtedly they died young, Reyin. So at least was my judgement".

I was stunned by what she had told me and I rose, much amazed. "I thank you, Antonia, for telling me of these marvels".

Seeing that I was visibly shaken, Antonia smiled in kindly fashion. "You must remember, Reyin, that all this took place in what is known as the Tertiary period. Doubtless in those years on the surface you saw books with reproductions of the huge animals men have dug up, such as the Brontosaurus, Tyrannosaurus, Mammoth and the like?". I had. "I have no doubt that all life in those far off days was large, including people. Recall that by the time our Egyptian ancestors arose, these creatures had long been swept away, doubtless by some cataclysm. Our ancestors were only slightly taller than we, as all the excavated evidence tends to prove".

"I understand, Antonia".

"I hope you will come again, Reyin".

"You may rely on it, Antonia. When I have digested what you have told me, for I would know more. For you spoke true. I can make love, and I can fight. Yet am I deficient in learning". She bowed, and I left.

Outside my guards were where I had left them, lounging against the pillars of the building. "Come" said I, and they followed their Reyin. I was still musing when I reached the Palace and dismissed them. I was all set to tell mine mother of the wonders I had heard when Drusilla, eyes a-dance, gripped mine wrist. "Olympias" she squealed happily, "the Queen agrees". I am much surprised, in retrospect, that Drusilla did not jump up and down in joy. I looked at the smiling Selene and our proud mother.

"Ay, I have agreed" the Queen said, with mock disapproval, "yet I would not have had this happen. I fear for you; yet am I proud of my valorous daughters, and you too, brave Selene". I saw well that her eyes were lustrous. "Sit with me and we will discuss this matter, and what must be done".

"One thing we must do is to go to the Temple" announced devout Selene, "and seek the blessing of the great Inanna on our perilous venture. For perilous it is. As we are all warriors I need not say that death awaits us on the valley floor".

"Indeed you need not, Selene" Drusilla replied, "and I beg you not to refer to it again. I have noted this in you before. You think too much, you examine too much. Yet you are brave in battle as I know well. You would not be my dear friend, else". Selene laughed.

"Ay, but mark this. As this deed will bring honour to all maids, whether high or low, this is my will". The Queen was serious now. "I wish you to fight for Themis, not simply for personal honour". We nodded readily, yet wondering what lay behind her words. "Thus will you undertake this deed in the silver armour of the people and not in the gold of the noble maids".

Drusilla shrugged her unconcern. "What matters it as long as the armour is strong".

"As it will be, daughter, for you will be mauled exceedingly. I will see to your arming myself. Yet there is no difficulty, the Royal Armoury being well provided with all needful. I would have you completely protected from the monsters; yet will you be in great danger".

Drusilla giggled. "That, dearest mother, is the joy".

"I know it well, Drusilla. Did I not raise you in the traditions of your ancestors? And I tell you true, daughter" - and I saw the inner hardness of the Amazon mother rise in her face - "if you fall in performance of this noble deed, I shall inwardly grieve, yet my heart will swell with pride".

"I would expect no less from the Queen and my mother" Drusilla replied proudly.

"Ay, but mark this, Drusilla, and you too Selene, Olympias will be Queen after myself. You must protect her life even at the sacrifice of your

own. 'Tis understood?".

"Dearest mother" Drusilla said quietly, intensely, "it has long been my wish to give my life for Olympias. I pledge you that if I leave my body on the valley floor, Selene will bring Olympias back to you, and give no heed to Drusilla, her fate". Mine mother reached out and clasped her hand with tenderness, whereat Drusilla laughed a little breathlessly. "Now am I not a worthy maid to spring from the royal stem?".

Much moved mine mother said: "Sweet Drusilla, since you issued from my belly, no day has passed that I have not rejoiced in you".

I saw Selene's glance wavered and I heard her sniff. And I likewise, seeing through a blur. Then we laughed at ourselves, and our emotion, so rare as to be a sweet memory.

"So then" the Queen said, with a sudden briskness, "let us eat. For I need not ask Selene, for her loyalty to the royal house is unquestioned, and I know that she too would not hesitate to yield up her life for Olympias".

Selene went pink, murmuring: "'Tis both my duty and my joy".

The day for our meeting with the monsters came and our excitement was, I confess, almost unbearable. It had been well noised abroad, so that the entire city knew of it, and gloried in their Reyins. Their enthusiasm could be cut with a knife, knowing that we would be fighting for them as well as for ourselves. When we walked among them, before the appointed day, we had been cheered in most boisterous fashion. Drusilla gurgled in delight and Selene murmured: "Faith, what will it be like when we walk out on the day, I wonder?". She might well ask the question.

Before that day we were careful to make love (for we had sinew-cracking desire for each other always) for as Selene reminded us, it was possible that one of us might not return. Or maybe all, though that was not likely. And as Drusilla muttered: "May Inanna aid Themis if we do not; for that would mean Morpasia". We consoled ourselves with the thought that if both Drusilla and Olympias were slain, and Selene survived, the Queen would formally adopt Selene as her daughter, and so block Morpasia. This expedient had been used, many centuries before, and was quite lawful. But we were confident that the expedient would be unnecessary. Yet the monsters were fearsome adversaries and one never knew what might occur. It had been known in the arena that a blow from a massive paw to a maid's armoured head had sent her to Inanna's bosom in the instant. But we were brave and strong, and our helmets would be of triple plate, and we laughed at the danger.

We could not really concentrate on love. Our thoughts were elsewhere. Eventually we ruefully conceded the fact to each other, and sat on the bed, holding hands: "Alas, we are seduced by the excitement of combat" sighed Selene regretfully, "is it not strange that it should be so?".

"Nay, it is not strange at all" Drusilla said crisply. "And you know it, friend Selene". She gave her sly little smile and added: "For your nipples are quite as hard as ours. I fear me you are something of a fraud, Selene and I wonder much at my love for you". And we laughed.

"So let us go to the Queen and don our equipage" I remarked. "For I know well we shall not be happy till we are on the valley floor, axe in hand".

The first task was to don the leather suits, tight packed with hair. They are lined with soft fur and were warm and comforting. Then came the silver armour, cunningly devised. I do not wish to go too much into detail, which would bore surface dwellers for whom complete armour is something archaic, of interest only to frequenters of museum. Yet I must say that even the finest flowering of your surface armourers - that is to say in the fifteenth century - had been surpassed by our

own. When, in the surface world, gunpowder was invented, rendering armour if not superfluous of less use, leather buckles were still being used for fixing plates together. About the same time we abandoned straps, our armourers inventing the hinge, or rather, applying it to armour for the first time. Leather straps could be sliced through by a sharp sword; and when the body is exposed by the shoring away of armour, the maid is as good as dead. The hinge was, and is, always on the left side where one is additionally protected by our large circular shield. On the right side, and all fixings, are in the form of a cunning locking mechanism. This can only be smashed by a direct mace blow and since the mechanism is placed out of the line of a direct blow, it has reduced risks to a non-existent level. The helmet, for instance, is locked at the rear; this justified the proud boast of our armourers that a maid, once sealed in her armour, was safe from scathe except, perhaps, from a direct mace or axe blow.

The other bane of the surface warrior was the armpit, where the mail was exposed, always susceptible to arrow penetration, and if fighting at close quarters, by halberd, sword and spear. With us this was very early closed off by plates attached to the shoulder armour by welding.

Then, since we were maids and our reproductive organs had to be protected strongly, there came the hip armour, triple plated and locked at the rear. These plates came as low as the thigh, for obvious reasons. It would be difficult to convey the security one feels when this is settled firmly around the body. The first time I was equipped, I remember I laughed in sheer delight, for it makes you feel invincible. Our leg and foot armour is much the same as you see in your museums, except that where possible hinges are used as opposed to straps.

Our ladies fluttered around us, arming us, while the Queen watched with pride, checking everything. Then as a mark of signal favour, kissed us, with many sweet words, before placing the thickly padded bascinets on our heads. We have always adhered to this shape, as it deflects sword and axe blows so well. Nor were these helmets visored as we had found, in battle, that the pivot could be smashed by repeated mace blows, thus leaving a maid mighty vulnerable. But just like the visored bascinet, which we used for practice only, there was a slit to see through, and ventilation holes for air. Then came the throat protection that covered the top of the neck plate and the bottom of the helmet. The Queen then remarked that we were the best protected maids who ever went out to do battle with a fearsome enemy.

Then came our chief priestess to pray over us and to beg Inanna to strike with us; after this we knelt and the Queen gave us her blessing. Rising we drew on our metal gauntlets while our arms - sword and double-headed axe, always the fighting weapon of our race - were belted around us. We were ready to face what might be.

In retrospect, I swear the most daunting thing was reaching the top of the Palace steps and seeing the huge crowd and hearing their cheers echoing around our helmets. Our mother, not wishing to detract from our hour, went by the privy way to the city walls from where, over the gate, she was to watch us fight. She told us later that within her the mother warred with the Queen, the one fearful, the other proud. The royal guards kept us from the people's enthusiasm. Then we came to the gate. The great bolts, thick as our arms, were drawn back and the gate opened just wide enough for us to slip through. Then, like the crack of doom we heard them rammed back into their sockets - one, two, three. I laughed: "Live or die, we are alone".

"Praise be to Inanna" Drusilla chuckled, "our people's love can be mighty embarrassing at times". I knew what she meant.

Except where we were the cliffs dropped sheer two hundred feet to the valley. Our path zig-zagged its way, sharply into the valley; because of

the sharp twists of the path, our descent must have been nearer three hundred feet. I led the way, for I was the first-born, the heir to the throne; in any case, it was mine fight. I was eager, excited. Behind me I heard Drusilla say in a voice clearly audible. "I wager Olympias is wet". I smiled; she knew me through and through. And she was right of course.

Selene said gravely: "I know not about Olympias, Drusilla. But of a certainty I am. And you too I doubt not!".

Drusilla gave her customary giggle. "Of a surety. 'Twill be a joyous adventure".

I stopped briefly and looked back at the city. It was like a toy on the high cliff. "We must look like silver dolls to the people, and our Queen". Then I went on the way down. I wondered absently if the monsters could see us. I hoped so. We must be shining in 'the light that never dies'. Even creatures with only a rudimentary intelligence must sense the presence of an enemy. Selene laughed at mine spoken thought: "Nay, you understand not, sweet Olympias. They smell us rather than see. They live in the darkness of the caverns and see not so well. They can smell a maid at a considerable distance; it may be that, to them, we have a distinct odour. And they do so love our soft flesh and our sweet blood. Fear not, brave Reyin, they will come. Go we to the edge of the light and wait. Yet as we have reached the valley, it is most meet that we heft our axes". It was good advice.

"Ay, 'tis so" murmured mine sister, eyeing the keen edges of her axe, dreamily, "I do so long to drive this into a great hairy body. Yet normally they come not to the light, mightily fearing our laser guns. Yet their hatred for our species is so great and their desire for our flesh so urgent, they will come, doubt it not. And we must shine like beacons".

"And yet, brave warriors both" Selene remarked, "treat not this lightly. Our enemies are formidable and this is a combat we may not survive. Yet if one of us should drop, remember that Olympias is our future Queen and we must buy her life, at any cost".

"O, peace, Selene" Drusilla remarked, impatiently. "I know my duty. Presume not to tutor me". At times she could be mighty prickly and arrogant, could Drusilla, even with Selene, whom she loved greatly.

"'Tis well" Selene replied. "I did but.....but see yonder, dear friends".

We looked across the depressing, rock-strewn terrain beyond the light shed by the city. It was lit by a reflected half-light; and beyond that, darkness. Yet at about five hundred paces one of the monsters was leaping up and down, uttering guttural cries and beating his chest. "He calls other males to join him for the kill" Drusilla conversationally, as if we were choosing cloth for a new stola. "We wanted combat. Make ready, sister, and you too, Selene. And forgive my sharp tongue. This is it indeed. Even as Selene says, 'twill not be easy, and we shall be much mauled, and suffer hurt. Yet we are warriors, are we not?".

I experienced a delicious thrill as I saw one....two....three.....then five others join the original one and leap up and down howling their enmity.

Selene laughed brittly: "May Inanna strike with us. We have two apiece. Great odds indeed".

"I could wish more" drawled Drusilla, "yet 'twill serve".

They came, roaring defiance, swinging towards us on all fours. Then halfway, almost in unison, they stopped, rearing up on hind legs, beating their chests. They were monsters indeed, with ugly, featureless faces, slobbering mouths and hair covered bodies. Repulsive as all this was, their great swollen genitals were more so. I gripped mine axe.

I would be hard put to it to make you understand the shock of our meeting. You must imagine in terms of the greatest gorilla in your zoos and increase it by one-third. Nor can I relate, in detail, what happened to Drusilla and Selene. In an enclosed helmet you can only see what is in front of you. More, in a battle it is every maid for herself. If you go down it is held to be your fault, or your misfortune. Perhaps we were foolish to try to meet the monsters toe to toe, for our strength is not their strength. Yet were we superbly protected, and had our weapons, and were trained to kill. But they were killers, too, by instinct. Many maids have followed our path, and the advice they are given is always to give way to the first rush. We did not, and paid the price; yet at first I had success.

I swung mine axe, plunging it deep into the chest, then wrenched it free. The beast's blood spurted on to mine armour. It screeched and a great paw smashed against mine bascinet. Dazed, I reeled back, then came forward, angry, swinging the axe again. I buried it in the head. The thing must have been dead on its feet but two great arms circled mine waist, lifting me off the ground. Then it dropped, taking me with it. I scrambled up, and plunged into an orgy of destruction. Selene was down; she was groaning and was being clawed at by a triumphant monster. Mine axe split open his skull and he collapsed. I pulled Selene to her feet but as I did so I took a massive blow in the back of mine helmet.

Blood gushed from mine nose and I went down, helplessly, stunned. The beast smelled mine blood and was on me in a moment, roaring in triumph, clawing at my helmet, slipping on the smooth metal. I could not use mine axe and his great weight pinned me to the ground. I was losing consciousness and I prepared for death. I prayed to Inanna. It seemed to me that she answered mine plea, for the beast fell sideways, dead. Yet it was not Inanna, but the brave Selene, near spent, but protecting her Reyin until she dropped dead. She hauled me to my feet.

We plunged into the formless melee with the roaring beasts. I got a glimpse of Drusilla, hard-pressed but like a true Amazon warrior seeking no aid. There were three beasts left, seemingly. They were hurt and a hurt monster is doubly dangerous. They came at us, determined to kill, as is their nature. I felt blood on mine lips, sweet and hot. Again I felt a glancing blow to mine head. I gasped at its force and struck hard. The axe smashed in the breastbone and, screeching, it went down, great arms flailing. As I turned from it to help Selene, I saw Drusilla's gleaming body whirled aloft. I leapt towards her, burying mine much bloodied axe deep into her attacker's shoulder. He gave a roar, dropped Drusilla and turned to me; I took a crashing paw on my breast but I hacked him down. Drusilla lay still, so I turned to aid Selene; but she needed no help, for I saw her standing over the last monster who seemed reluctant to die. But he did.

"Olympias" she wheezed, "you are a great warrior". We supported each other. "Yet have I never had a harder fight. These monsters are worthy opponents. For a while our lives hung by a thread.....but by Inanna, you are covered with blood!" and she laughed.

"As are you, dear friend".

"Ay, but look we to Drusilla. She lays still; but she has done good work too for her axe is covered with blood".

"True. And she cannot be slain but is in a stupor from a fall".

"So leave we her and finish these beasts that yet have life".

As we did so a faltering sigh came from Drusilla's helmet. We asked how she did and she struggled to rise which, with our help, she did. We all laughed as we regarded each other. We had walked out pristine but now were sorely marked with battle.

At a distance we saw other monsters, jumping up and down, and roaring as is the way of the beasts. "So, 'tis not all over!" Drusilla chuckled. "I would welcome another passage of arms!". I turned mine admiring gaze on her marvelling where she got her reckless courage. But she was right of course. Our blood was up and we felt truly invincible.

I said: "Will they attack?". Then, realising it was a foolish question, I added quickly: "Shall we stand our ground?".

"Stand?". Selene gave a laugh that was not a laugh, a hoarse sound that echoed in mine bascinet. "Do we have a choice, Olympias? They are too close for us to run, and your Queenly mother looks upon you. We are Amazon maids and run not. We fight till we die". She looked around at the boulder-strewn terrain and sniffed. "And this may be the place".

"Ay, 'tis so" Drusilla thought, swinging her axe grimly. "But what of it?".

What indeed. I tingled with excitement and I doubted not that my comrades felt likewise. The appetite indeed grows by what it feeds on. I know not if the monsters have any reasoning capacity. I doubt it; they are just animals. Yet had they had a brain, I imagine the sight of us standing there, shining and truculent, would have been an offence to them. Maybe they knew us to be enemies to be destroyed. Drusilla laughed. "What keeps them, I wonder?".

"Patience, Reyin" Selene remarked calmly. "They will come". And they did. Three of them, one larger than the other two.

Again Drusilla laughed. "Olympias, sweet sister, mark you that big monster? I think it most meet, as the whole city looks upon us, not to mention our Queenly mother, that you destroy it".

"Most willingly, sister". We spoke conversationally as if life and death was a small matter. "But look to yourselves, for they grow near. And if we meet next in Paradise, know you have the love of Olympias".

We crouched awaiting the onslaught, axes at the ready. But this time came a new ingredient. As the monsters came, they picked up rocks from the valley floor and hurled them. One clanged against mine breast. It staggered me much, but did not fell me. I heard Selene gasp as she too was struck, but she likewise recovered. But alas, the brave Drusilla, being struck on the helmet, high up, for the second time lay down in a stupor.

"There goes the gallant Drusilla" cried Selene, distressfully. It was the last thing I heard before battle was joined. For all I knew my sister might be slain, but I knew her armour was stout. I swung mine axe; it buried itself in his left shoulder, but his other paw struck me to the ground. No maid could have stood up under such a fearsome blow, nay, not even the Queen. Then the great beast was on me, pounding at mine helmet. His weight pinned me to the ground and I could not move. I was likewise losing consciousness. So this was death. I prayed to Inanna to receive my spirit. It seemed to me that she answered the plea for the great beast fell sideways, its skull smashed. Yet it was not Inanna, but the brave Selene, having killed her monster, turned to save her Reyin. She was near spent as I could see, staggering with weariness. She hauled me to mine feet and I instantly looked for Drusilla. She had gone!

Selene caught me. "They have her, Olympias. We can do nothing. The gallant maid would not complain.....".

I cursed she who I loved, asking her did she not know that Drusilla shared my bed. Shaking her off I lumbered off into the semi-darkness. Drusilla was being dragged by her leg, bouncing over the rock-strewn ground. Selene was sworn to protect me and had no choice but follow me. The monster let Drusilla go and turned. Selene leapt forward and for her pains took a mighty blow. I heard her cry out, spin on her heels and fall face first, her head crashing against a boulder as she fell. I heard the monster's roar of triumph as it attacked me.

It struck me on the side of mine helmet, close to the jaw. Mine eyes danced in their sockets. I sank to mine knees, feeling mighty sick, yet conscious. Yet I knew I was a dead maid, or thought I was. Incredibly, instead of finishing me, as another maid in combat would, he gave me a kick that sent me sprawling, and then turned to his original victim, thinking mayhap (if they can think, which I gravely misdoubt) that I was done for anyway, and that he could attend to me at his leisure. Yet was he wrong.

I glanced sideways at Selene. Groaning, she tried to rise, but fell forward; then using her axe as a support, she reached her knees. I had thought her finished, for sure; but the sight gave me hope. I too levered myself up. The beast was bent over Drusilla, clawing at her helmet. I could hear her low moans and the sound pricked my valour. I stood, swaying indeed, yet flexing weary muscles for what I knew had to come.

The beast heard mine armour grate as I raised the axe. It turned with a roar of rage; but I was ready for it. I smashed mine axe into its jaw. It went deep, opening up the broad, flat nose and slicing the slit that served it for a mouth in four. I hated with a virulence and laughed at its screech; but in truth I was held up only by the haft of the axe so firmly anchored in its ugly face. His paws clawed at mine helmet, feebly. Again I laughed, a rasping, breathless laugh that I did not recognise; then I wrenched the axe free and the blood belched at me. As it started to go down I struck in a frenzy at anything, but especially at the genitals, now of a quite monstrous size. It lay on its back, legs kicking in the air, breath roaring in its chest; then it stopped.

"Hurry!" croaked Selene. She and I got a hand under Drusilla's armpits and dragged her back into the light. She was moaning softly. Then a croak issued from her scored helmet.

"Nay, dear friends, I was prepared to die. Why risk your sweet lives for me? You should have left me".

"Oh, for sure!" I jeered. "As you would me!".

Selene grunted: "Ay, you speak foolishly, Drusilla. Leave you, forsooth! And what would the Queen say?". She croaked a laugh. "My head looks so well on my shoulders".

I looked at her in love. Always a fine figure of a maid, her conical bascinet made her appear taller than she was. In peace, Selene gave the impression of strength in repose. In a fight there is no maid I would rather have with me. Indeed, Drusilla and I, despite our high rank, instinctively deferred to her, recognising a born leader. Even as I was thinking this there came a hail of rocks, not large indeed, that clattered against our bodies. I groaned, peering through the slits in mine bascinet, seeing more of the beasts.

"Alas" Selene remarked quietly, "we can do no more. We are dead maids. Let us commend our souls to Inanna and meet we our fate, like warriors".

Drusilla staggered to her feet. She seemed very composed, docile even: "You say truly, Selene. Yet stand we together, and fall together".

I nodded: "Ay, that is the way of it". And in truth we were composed and prepared to die. Flight was unthinkable, even had our leaden legs been willing to carry us. The city, which watched from afar, would see that it had not bred craven bitches. So we stood, waiting for the end.

I looked around at the depressing valley. "A silly place to die, Selene".

She laughed: "No place is a good place, Olympias".

Drusilla dissented: "Sister, when there is no choice, one place is much like another".

"True".

I know not what we would have done had the monsters come upon us then. Yet I do know; hurt as we were, we would have fought and died fighting, for that is our way. But we were spared the monsters' massive jaws, or the urn. For the Queen, seeing from afar, recognised our condition, and ordered the guards to fire their laser weapons, not to destroy the creatures, but to discourage them. We saw the thin beams of blue light pass far above us, and watched them strike boulders, which simply ceased to be. And the monsters fled, howling.

More than that, however, the Queen was not prepared to do. This will astonish you, raised in a totally different society, but to us it was normal enough. We are a tough people; hardihood for hardihood's sake, if you wish to put it that way. We knew no succour would come from the city; the gates would not open to reveal a rescue party. As I had said when we had started on our adventure, we were alone. It was a question of pride, honour and other qualities which you on the surface have forgotten or rejected. We could see that the walls were lined still, with appreciative maids. That appreciation was vocal, as we could hear, and we needed to justify that appreciation. Ay, it was our pride.

Yet we still had to climb that path to the city and we were each of us hurt and bleeding; you could not take the punishment we had taken without blood. I could taste it on mine lips, in the mouth; and Drusilla was hurt most of all, and staggered like a maid the worse for wine. Selene and I got our arms around her and she was so stricken that she did not object. Indeed, we virtually carried her, her armoured feet leaving tracks in the dust; and she was softly moaning, as well she might.

Our progress was slow, and painful. For a time the city seemed not to get nearer, so tortuous was the path. Then Drusilla swooned. We laid her down on the path and dropped beside her, looking at her battered body, arms wide flung. Neither Selene or I had much breath to make idle conversation. We just stared at each other, marvelling that we were both alive. Then Drusilla moved feebly. We got her on her feet and moved forward again. For a little while she walked with us, then she sagged again. For a little time she shambled on. "Forgive my weakness" she mumbled.

"Talk not foolishly" I gasped.

Then she swooned again. We were perhaps, in your terms, five hundred yards from the city gate. Looking up I saw the Queen and the people crowding the walls. We lowered Drusilla again, and sank beside her. Selene gave a little laugh as she looked at my sister's bloody breastplate. "By Inanna's bones" she opined, "we are the very image of Amazon warriors, battered, coated with blood and filth. For we each made acquaintance with the cruel ground".

I felt like death, and I mumbled: "I know not if I can go on, Selene",

There was a chink of metal as she looked up sharply. "Not go on? Having done so much? Suffered so much? Fought so gallantly? And your mother's heart swelling with pride at the fruit of her belly? You talk nonsense, Olympias. Here lies your sister in a swoon, as well she might. She needs you. I need you. Themis needs you. You are our future Queen, and our glory. Let me hear no more of this". She was sharp but loving; and it brought me to myself again.

Selene had plumbed my depths were early, recognising my overweening pride in honour, rank and skill as a warrior; and she used it ruthlessly. I cursed her roundly, but I had no heart for it, as she knew well. Then impulsively I took her hand. "Dear friend, you speak truth, as always. We three have been to Tophet and back. And I ask you, Selene, was it not a glorious fight?".

She visibly relaxed and laughed: "Was it not, Olympias! And I see you have recovered your courage".

"Ay, and I thank you, and ask you to forgive mine weakness".

"Pish! 'Tis tiredness merely. More warriors are slain through weariness than by a more skilful enemy. Yet see, Drusilla moves again. Like a stricken butterfly somewhat, yet move she does".

Again we hauled her up and staggered on, crashing against the massive gate. Drusilla whispered: "I thank you, comrades, for getting me thus far. Yet now, let me be, for I must walk in unaided, for am I not Drusilla, a daughter of the royal house? I must show no weakness".

Nor did she. The bolts slammed back and we staggered through - I will not say walked. This time the reception was different. There was some ragged cheering but I saw pride and awe strangling them. They crowded in behind us, murmuring greatly, making inventory of every honourable mark on our harness, every dent, every claw mark. I think it was basking in their love that gave us the strength to reach the Forum and make our way towards the Palace steps. I am told we dripped blood onto the paving stones. It would not surprise me, and I glory at it.

There at the top of the steps stood the Queen, in golden robes. I saw her through a blur. Then she seemed to recede, then grew large again. I knew, by this token, how close to swooning I was. Yet pride would not let me drop.

Those eighty steps daunted us. Then, hand in hand, we mounted, one painful step at a time, each of us groaning, breath rasping - yet deriving comfort from the pressure of our hands. I kept mine eyes on the Queen's diadem that one day I would wear. The red mist came again but went away. I defied exhaustion. How we reached the top I know not, unless it was arrogance of spirit that would not allow us to drop, or stumble. The Queen told us our blood was running in thin rivulets down our smooth plate. Well, it was good blood, honourably spilt.

On reaching the Queen I saw her eyes were glistening. We said nothing, she and I, yet I saw her swallow hard. We turned, acknowledging the relieved cheers of the people, before passing through the columns and into the Palace. Only here could we show weakness. The Royal guard gathered around us, strongly supporting; with their visors up I could see their concern. Then the bronze doors of the private apartments closed behind us and we sank heavily on to the marble benches. Now we could groan from our wounds, and did.

Our ladies fluttered around us, cooing, adulatory. To Charmion I mumbled something, I know not what. And when we were unhelmed, there were cries of distress at our condition and the Queen savagely told them to be silent, and had we not suffered enough, and to perform their function. Then I did, in truth, swoon away, plunging into a bottomless pit of inky blackness. As I slipped away I thought, if this is Death, then Welcome. Yet it was not death and I clawed mine way out of the dark into the light, yet floating in a sea of nausea. But enough of weakness, unseemly in (as you would say) a Princess.

It seemed to me as if I floated, not anchored to mine bench. Charmion had removed mine gauntlets and was fiddling with the lock of the neck armour. Then, lifting off the bascinet, I heard her sharp intake of breath. "Reyin, thy face.....".

"I doubt it not, Charmion" I mumbled, trying to smile and finding the exercise hurt. "Yet 'twill be well".

Then were three goblets of wine brought and, sipping, we soon felt more like ourselves. The liquid, coursing down our throats, brought relief, counter-acting our exhaustion. Water was brought and our hurts attended to, the blood being wiped quite away. We looked at each other in grim satisfaction.

"There were times, out there" Selene announced, "I expected not to drink wine again".

Charmion showed me mine bascinet. I now saw how blood had sprayed out through the ventilation holes and gleamed still on the smooth plate. I had not realised how badly I had been hurt, though I knew blood had gushed from mine nose. A blow from a monster, I reflected, is much like a mace blow.

After a space Drusilla spoke: "Ay, Selene, yet 'twas a great fight and one which I enjoyed greatly. It will surely be written in our chronicles". Drusilla had suffered most, taking more than her fair share of the brutalities of combat, and this being so I found her words quite delightful.

"And yet" Selene opined, as she always did when our hunger for glory became excessive, "had it not been for brave Olympias, you would even now be rent asunder, your dear flesh.....".

"O, peace Selene". Mine sister was irritable. "They would first have had to break into mine armour; and I still had my sword. Who knows what the end would have been? In any case, we knew the risks. I was prepared to die. I am an Amazon warrior. Each time we go into battle we know we may be slain. You are as sour as a priestess!".

"Nay, nay" Selene laughed, "not I, Drusilla. You are a maid of great courage; this I know".

The Queen, my lady mother, stirred herself, conquering her emotion. "You are all gallant maids, the pride of the city. Hush you now and let your ladies strip you".

Drusilla smiled at me, and I at her. Then both of us smiled at Selene with much fondness, impulsively taking her hand.

Irrepressible as ever, Drusilla went on: "Ay, and it was a fight we must repeat when we are again strong and vigorous. For I shall not be able to rest until I face them again. For mark me, the stronger is the enemy, the more danger to be faced, the greater the glory when you triumph".

"Ay, if you do" the Queen remarked, sharply. "Yet, daughter, this is a well to which you will not return too often. More than once a year I will not permit". Drusilla pouted delightfully. Against this our mother was not usually proof, but she was on this occasion. "Remember, Drusilla, the monsters are our only source of leather and I will not have you carve your way through the herd in search of honour".

"Pish! They breed like flies".

"I have spoken, Drusilla. Heed me well".

Secretly we agreed with Drusilla. We were bred up to fight; yet we were now much debilitated. We sat passively, letting our ladies strip us of our honourable equipage. And eventually sat we in our nakedness, surrounded by our bloodied and battered armour, which we regarded with pride.

"Ay, 'tis indeed a glorious sight" the Queen went on, "and on the morrow it will be exhibited in the Forum for all maids to see and venerate as proof of the valour of the royal house. And now I have words to say". She made a sign and our ladies, after obeisance, withdrew. We were all attention, gazing at our mother with anticipation. She leaned forward and took Selene's hand. "Selene, you have long served your Queen and she has cast around for a means with which to honour you. Your deeds this day, in the saving of the lives of my brave daughters more than once, as I did see, has placed you even higher in your Queen's regard. So I now announce to you that I have, for this day's work, made Selene a Daughter of the Palace".

We gasped and Selene, much astonished, sank to her knees in front of her Queen. It was an honour of Amazonia rarely given. It had, in fact, not been given for two hundred of your surface years. It was entirely in the Queen's gift and meant, quite simply, that Selene had been made, by adoption (as you would say) Reyin, a royal princess, with all perquisites attaching to that high station. She was our sister, with rich apartments

in the inner palace, with her own entourage, ladies-in-waiting and much, much more.

Selene was a broken maid, staining the Queen's hand with hot tears of joy. "Dearest Queen" she sobbed, "I will be a loving and loyal daughter".

"Will you not add" the Queen said, with a gentle smile, "a brave and gallant daughter also?". It was sweet to see Selene blush to the roots of her hair in delight, and she nodded. "And you must now address me as mother".

It pleased Drusilla and I mightily and we helped the Queen raise our friend. We kissed her, and with many an embrace of love, murmured: "Welcome sister, welcome dear Reyin". I wiped the tears from her face and sat her down by the Queen. I was, I confess, breathless, for when our breasts had touched in embrace, mine belly had turned to water, and I sat down, wide-eyed; and Drusilla, being the knowing witch she is, gazed at me in much amusement, her cheeks dimpling. And that lively devil, that I knew so well, danced in her eyes.

"And in the morn" the Queen went on, "must you be presented to the people, with trumpets and all ceremonies appropriate".

"Must I indeed, dear mother" a much embarrassed Selene wanted to know.

"Indeed you must, daughter. 'Tis an honour so rarely given, it must be so made. The people love you greatly for your qualities of guardianship of the law, and your wise counsel. Your elevation will be welcomed by all maids". We all knew it to be true. Nobody was more highly regarded, for her valour and other qualities. "But now are you much wearied and must go to bed. And in the morning your bodies will show the evidence of your battle. And it is most meet that you show yourselves to the people after the ceremony, and walk in the Forum with your guards. Even now your faces and bodies grow yellow with bruises. But knowing my daughters as I do, I know well you will bear them with pride, even when they turn black. Thus, to your mother's arms, and then, goodnight".

That night we three royal princesses lay together and when our ladies-in-waiting had withdrawn, we played briefly but exhaustion dragged us down to sleep. And in the morning when the same ladies came to wake us, we knew well we had been in combat and moved with great care. Yet bruises are a matter of pride to a maid and we inspected each other with glee. Mine own face was much yellowed, tinging into blue and Drusilla's, where the rock had struck her bascinet, was massively darkened. Yet she giggled proudly as she regarded herself in the reflective glass.

Once we had bathed, and our ladies had attended to our toilette, we felt better. And when adorned and elegant, we felt superb, despite our aches and pains. After all this we passed into our mother's apartments where we breakfasted. The Queen had been up betimes and was already arrayed in her regal robes of gold, with the heavy state crown on a red cushion nearby.

The scribes had laboured mightily to unearth the details of the ceremony and we read the proclamation that the Queen would read from the steps of the palace. "Mighty impressive" was the common judgement.

Then in time, Selene's moment of embarrassment and pride came, and surrounded by our ladies and the armoured royal guard we walked to the hall of marble, and waited while six trumpeters on the top of the palace steps called the people to the Forum. They came, until the great space was packed, and Selene groaned. Drusilla laughed: "'Twould take a good maid to wrest that from you with a sword!". Then we came forward, to the great applause of the people. Then, when the Forum grew silent, the Queen read the Proclamation:-



"Whereas I, Olympias, your Queen, have long been desirous of honouring the Guardian Selene, for much good counsel given in Council, the which is privy to the Queen, and for her many valorous deeds, and marking well her qualities of judgement and mind, have given much consideration to the matter. And whereas, as all maids here assembled do know, in the great fight with the monsters, the said Selene did, with great courage and gallantry, act as shield and buckler to my royal daughters, the Reyins Olympias and Drusilla, on more than one occasion saving them from death at great risk of encompassing her own, I, Olympias, your Queen, have thought it most meet that the said Selene be advanced to the greatest honour that Amazonia can bestow on its daughters; and accordingly from this moment forward the said Selene is a Daughter of the Palace, and my beloved daughter and your Reyin, with all perquisites thereto appertaining; her judgements shall be my judgements, enforceable and binding on all maids, irrespective of caste and rank".

The roar of approval that came up from the Forum was sufficient indication that Selene was much liked in the city, from highest to low. Then, after the Queen had retired into the Palace, we descended the long steps, accompanied by our guards. The people viewed us with awe and the hands that had visited so much destruction on the monsters were kissed so many times that we had perforce to extend both hands for worship; and had it not been for the guards, we would have been engulfed by enthusiasm. And our armour, set up early in the Forum by the Queen's command, was venerated as holy relics. For among us, valour is as saintliness used to be with you. Even we, who had worn it in battle, were astonished at its condition - the scratches from the great claws, the dents, the congealed monsters' blood. Drusilla's bascinet, strong as it was, had been dented where the rock had struck it, greatly dented. Even she knew how close to death she had come; for had the rock struck her slightly higher, nothing could have saved her from being brained, for its velocity had been great. When I hinted as much, she shrugged, treating it lightly. Yet she knew well enough, for although frivolous of speech when at play, her mind is as tough as her armour. I stared at mine own breastplate with some disbelief, for where the rock had struck me on the breast it was much scarred; and the bascinet had been greatly savaged by massive paws. So small wonder our subjects viewed us with great respect. In a military society that is balm to the soul.

Although this had been silver armour, and not the golden armour appropriate to our caste and high rank, the armourers were even now at work replacing it. And indeed, we knew not the hour or the day on which we would be called upon to lead the people in what Drusilla called "serious business". And although, happily, it was deferred for many years, there was Morpasia to think about.

Mine wicked sister, when noise of our valour reached her, smiled thinly: "One day I shall have to slay this new sister with the other two. And with Selene it will be an added joy in that this noble maid was always my enemy". Then, with unconscious humour, she is said to have added, with chilling menace: "My sisters will find that Morpasia is no monster".

Later we were called to the walls to witness a spectacle. We watched a party of tanners, guarded by laser-gun carrying guards, descend into the valley with their obsidian knives, to flay the dead monsters. I marvelled at their skill greatly for it was done with such dispatch that in less than an hour they were back in the walls of Themis. We were greatly amused that the party made no effort to penetrate the semi-darkness where lay my last victim. I blamed them not. Love had driven me there and they had not that stimulus.

Then, to our amazement, came beasts making much noise. They were female creatures and it appeared that they wailed. I gave orders that they were not to be fired upon, for was I greatly curious. They seemed to be making a ritual dance, after which they dragged away the bleeding carcasses. We stared at each other. "Did I not know better" Selene remarked

much astonished, "I would swear they shook their paws at us, in threatening fashion. Yet they are beasts and cannot reason".

"What will they do with them?".

"Why, they are carnivorous" Selene explained, "meat eaters. Doubtless they are cannibalistic likewise".

We found this mighty distasteful.

Then Drusilla laughed gaily: "Think we no more of beasts. Let us rather think, as warriors after a battle should, of self-indulgence. Charmion was telling me of a quiet house by the city wall where only noble maids may resort".

I looked at Selene, smiling: "How say you, sister?".

Gravely she murmured: "I have heard it said that in this life one should embrace all new experiences". Then her eyes twinkled: "I think Drusilla's idea is a fine one".

And it was indeed.

For many years I lived very happily with mine mother, Queen Olympias and Selene, mine friend, and the beloved Drusilla, not to mention the people of Amazonia. Peace had reigned for all of these years; for we had no natural enemies, except the monsters. Yet partly to keep our fighting wits keen, and partly to keep the numbers of our gladiatrices up to strength, and for other causes, every year we made a raid into the territory of the patriarchal tribes. It was therefore an act of policy.

You may well wonder why we do this. The question is a reasonable one. Obviously it is not a question of plunder, as the tribes have nothing that we want, except in one especial case. I have already hinted at one reason, as far as women are concerned; but we need the men too - to replenish our sperm banks so that our society may be perpetuated. We are as humane about this as we can be, returning the men to their tribe after our scientists have finished with them. Sometimes we keep some to work, after they have been operated upon (by which token they are known as 'the mindless ones') but so many strides have been made in cybernetics that we no longer have to do this to any great extent. Indeed, we do not want men near to us, except in the mines far below the city. We are aware, that life is more sacrosanct with you, and you may be shocked by this. Yet they are an inferior race and they have always been used so.

In regard to the 'one especial case' mentioned above, it had first been seen in my grandmother's time, and due note taken of it. In a raid due east from our city, she had come to a valley, dimly illuminated by fires, the primitive tribe not having our facilities for permanent light. My grandmother had seen something gleaming in the rock wall and had inspected it most closely. She struck it with her axe. With this one blow of her battle axe my grandmother exposed a solid ledge of silver ore of a very high grade. Our needs were not urgent at that time but subsequently the ore was worked to our great benefit.

It was in your year 1938 that my mother decided to make the annual raid in your month of August (our month of Mesore). I and Drusilla would accompany her, and Selene would rule the city in our absence. We would take with us a hundred young maids of acknowledged valour, for the patriarchals, primitive as they were, would put up a stubborn resistance. Doubtless some of us would fall by the wayside, that was inevitable; but we thought not of that. Those men we had to kill would be killed, but we would bring some back to work for us as 'mindless ones'. Further, we would take some of the women of the tribe and their girl brats. They would make fine gladiatrices. Normally we took only those near to, or above the limits of child-bearing. We had no wish to kill off the source of supply. Moreover, mature women were strong and they acquitted themselves well in the arena.

Before making a raid, those chosen go in procession to the Temple to pray for success for our arms; and it meet we do, for it stands to reason that despite the excellence of our protection not all of us will come back. Accidents happen, and the patriarchals with their iron axes and stone clubs fight with an animal-like ferocity. Thus we put our consciences in good order before leaving on a perilous undertaking.

Our Temple is not too dissimilar from your own churches, and our religion also not too dissimilar from your own, except that we do not, of course, worship a patriarchal God, but the Earth Mother under the name of Inanna. The entrance is pillared; after passing through the atrium one enters the broad temple. There are no aisles such as you have; but we do have an altar made out of a solid block of crystal. Above this is a lifesize statue of the Goddess in much the same way as you have a crucifix representing your Christ. Our priestesses wear robes of white and gold and the implements they use in saying the office are also made of ancient and venerable crystal.

Let me speak seriously to you. I am one who tends to compartmentalise her life; that is to say, I am not a devout. But I am Queen and have to set an example. Thus, I attend to mine religious duties with punctilio. It may be that the ways of the surface, to which I was subjected for sixteen years, have left their mark on me. Yet, like all mine people, I stand or fall on the Drispeal or triple-message of our Faith (or what you would call the Three Eternal Truths). What are they? It is quite simple:-

One God alone, none other God than She
One Law alone, none other Law than Her Law
God became maid that maid might come to God.

This is the primordial Truth that has always been taught, and will always be taught. Every Queen, every Reyin speaks it in the Coronation ceremony; every Priestess pronounces it daily in the Temple; and it is declaimed before every gathering, public or private.

This is what we mean when we speak of Lux Madriana or (in your tongue) the Light of the Goddess. And by this Light we live and die.

We have many Feast Days - such as Rosa Mundi, the Nativity of Our Lady, Feast of Lights, Feast of Divine Life, and Samhain - upon which attendance at the Temple is obligatory for all maids, both high and low. On these days no work is done. Yet the act of worship preceding a raid is, I think, the most moving of all. As a warrior Queen I would naturally think that, yet I believe all mine people believe it likewise. For it is then, and then only I suspect, that the realities are made manifest; that is to say, that of those maids kneeling before the priestess, a few (happily not many) will not be kneeling there again, and the knowledge is at once exciting and chastening to us. In your own vernacular, this is what we are about; for this are we bred up. After this act of worship, each maid repairs to her abode where she arms herself for what may be.

Most maids chosen are young, for once trained each maid is eager for the fray; for it is one thing to learn the skills, and quite another to use them in a situation where another is seeking to take your life. And it is delightful to our maids to fight and slay a man for two very good reasons. First, until one does so one is not adjudged a warrior, the proudest designation in our society; and secondly, men are the enemies of our sex and have been so since the beginning of Time. Thus, there is much eagerness, much laughter, and beating of brave hearts; and much cheering, too, from the people as we assemble. Mothers shed tears of pride, regarding their gleaming daughters from the tip of their bascinets to the toes of their sabatons.

Thus it was on the Feast of Moira that we marched, mine mother, the Queen, Drusilla, myself and a hundred other maids, young and eager. As we marched we sang the old song of mine people:-

March on, march on,
The world is to deliver;
March on, march on,
Brave daughters of the West,
For they that fall in this war
Shall be in Heaven blest,
And our mothers' flag shall fly again,
March on.

March on, March on,
There can be no surrender;
March on, march on
And victory shall be ours,
For years of bold Amazon blood
Are lost in these few hours
Or our mothers' flag shall fly again,
March on.

The patriarchal tribes are reached without difficulty by the intricate tunnel system in which your academic writers do potentially disbelieve, to our great amusement. As said elsewhere, none of our records shed any light on the race which created this network. Yet they must have been a great race; and the supposition must be that their society was based on slavery.

Everyone had eaten before we left Themis and carried but a small supply of food in our pouches. Maids are not like men; we can exist on very little. Then the Queen, who had led many such raids, bade us sleep. Guards were placed, after which helmets were unlocked, and we lay in true comradeship. Then, in the morning, after a frugal meal, helmets were locked into place, and we went on our way.

Then, after a space, we emerged into a valley; below us we saw a primitive village, a cluster of thatched huts, thrown into relief by a circle of fires. In their light we saw men and women, crouching around the iron pots in which they had cooked the mess they ate for sustenance. "Now, brave maids" the Queen said softly, "that for which you have yearned has arrived. Heft your axes; then, as silently as may be, follow me down this path. It may not be that we shall surprise them, for our armour will gleam in their firelight. Yet one word - they have had the wit to construct a pallisade around their camp. We shall have to smash through that before we can reach them. That should be no problem".

A maid gurgled: "'Tis delightful".

"Ay, delightful indeed" murmured the Queen. "Yet treat it not lightly. These creatures fight savagely, like animals. I know, for I have faced them before. Heed me now".

We had by this time reached the bottom of the track and up to this point fortune had not deserted us; it was about to desert us. Suddenly a cry went up from the village. "So, we are discovered" Drusilla laughed.

"Ay, daughter" the Queen said, "so charge we".

And we did. Most of us followed the Queen, yet two maids, too eager, left the path and charged parallel to us. There is always much competition to plunge into the fray first. Yet suddenly the earth gave way and, with a cry, they sank into slime. It brought us to a stop, this tragedy, causing us to crash into one another. "In the name of Inanna" cried the Queen, "keep to the path!".

We watched the poor maids with sympathy and on that day mine admiration for the Amazon race was profound. After that first shocked cry, they did not whimper. Up to their waists in slime, they knew there was nothing we could do. All we could do was stand and watch. Nay, they whimpered not; all they did was raise their hands and pray to Inanna. The slime crept up their gleaming bodies and now they sank quickly in the gurgling horror. It was soon at their necks, and still they prayed fervently. Then their conical helmets sank beneath the slime. What could one say? What was there to say? They died without fuss.

The delay had given the patriarchals time to prepare a reception for us. We charged up the slight slope amid a hail of arrows. One maid, quite forgetting the words of her instructors, failed to keep her head lowered. An arrow entered through the eye slit of her bascinet. We heard her scream but turned not. Those coming after leapt over her as she clawed uselessly at the shaft that protruded from her helmet. As we reached the pallisade we could still hear her screams, dimly.

The patriarchals had a strange tactic. Having discharged their arrows, the men had vanished from the pallisade. As we hacked at the pallisade with our axes, the wild women, in their animal skins, hurled javelins. We ignored these as they clattered away harmlessly. Then we were through and into the village.

The men now appeared, bearing axes and stone clubs, roaring defiance. As the maid had said, it was delightful indeed. We hurled ourselves at them and they at us; the shock of our meeting was great. I wish I could tell you the course of the fight but you must forgive me. In a battle it is every maid for herself. In any case, the battle was cruel. Despite the excellence of our protection, I wish to tell you that I would much rather face another maid with a mace in her hand and mine shield on mine arm. Facing a patriarchal with a stone club, while exciting, is mighty dangerous. A blow on one's bascinet in the wrong place can mean perpetual night. Happy is the maid who faces an axe. I did not, nor did Drusilla, nor did the Queen. I was struck many times before mine axe clove his skull. Drusilla was hard pressed and I threw myself to her aid.

By then the fight had lost all pretence to form; there was no line, just numerous individual combats. I placed myself with Drusilla and doggedly fought it out. One wellplaced blow could have any time have settled our business, and we knew it. Yet of course we triumphed, for we were in good measure impervious to even the most savage blow to our body armour. Unless of course the head was involved.

To my lasting shame I had quite forgotten the Queen. Mine eyes had been full of Drusilla. The Queen was a veteran of countless raids. How could I have known? I placed an arm around Drusilla, asking if she was alright. "Fair enough, Olympias" she panted, "and for your aid I thank you. It was hot there for a while".

"Ay, so it was, sister". I stared at mine axe. It was covered with patriarchal blood, as was the gauntlet of mine hand; and I was liberally splashed. We laughed together briefly, regarding each other, in sheer love of battle. Then she gripped mine arm. "The Queen! Our mother is on the ground.....see Olympias".

We stared down at our mother. She moved not. I saw her helmet was dented, just below the red plume. A nameless dread seized me. The maids were going around finishing off the men who yet lived. I sank to mine knees. "I fear me our lady mother is slain, sweet Drusilla. Yet stay". I removed mine gauntlet, then the Queen's. I felt her pulse; there was no movement. I said nothing. I resumed mine gauntlet, then restored the Queen's. I wanted to weep but knew I dared not. Drusilla put her hand on mine shoulder. I rose then and spoke to her in a choking voice. "Drusilla.....sister.....our Queen is no more. Our mother is slain".

She sank to one knee and took mine hand. I had not expected reality so soon, and was startled. "Then are you Queen. I, Drusilla, swear fealty. I am your liege maid until I die and swear to defend your person against all comers. All this I swear and, with Inanna's aid I will so perform". It was the ancient oath of our people.

The surviving maids now gathered around me and likewise knelt, and likewise swore. This was unseasonal, yet I thanked them for their fidelity.

"Our losses?".

"Two, my Queen". My attention was drawn to silver bodies which lay very still. "It is unseemly for maids to lie in the gore of men. They will lie with more honour with their comrades. See to it". I then took Drusilla on one side. "Nothing alters for you, sister, just because I am Queen. I am always your Olympias, your lover. Yet our lady mother....." I choked on the word. "She we must bear back to Themis. Order that four maids in turn bear her body". I turned to look at the wailing women and spoke coldly. "And, in the name of Inanna, stop their noise!". Drusilla, nothing loth, went from me. I saw her hit the chief woman with the back of her armoured hand. The woman sank to the ground and the noise ceased. I called out. "And take that cloak of skins from her. 'Twill do to carry the Queen, her body". And it was so.

Mine head throbbed from a particular blow I had taken but that was nothing. What pounded in mine head was the knowledge that I was Queen. I had not wanted it for many years, and I hated the thought of it. And I would have to outface the bitch Morpasia. I would have to fight her, and either she would drop, or I would. I cursed fate. And mayhap also Drusilla and Selene would die. The thought was hateful to me; it was their duty of course, but it was nonetheless hateful. Olympias II! Mine mother had reigned for thirty-nine years, no great time among us. At the age of twenty-five she had ascended the throne in 1898; this made her 64 years of age, by our standards no more than middle age. Had it not been for that accursed stone axe she could have looked forward to almost as much again, for we live long, much longer than maids on the surface. How long would I reign? That would depend on Morpasia's mace.

We drove the captives before us without charity and without respite. They wailed mightily. Drusilla laughed softly: "They will wail more when they realise their fate". And when I said nothing, she scanned mine mind: "Worry not about our wicked sister, Olympias. I will stand with you, as will Selene, and all the Council and the city. You are much loved and she greatly hated".

"Yet she has to be told".

"Of a surety. Yet 'twill take her time to gather her army of criminals and malcontents; they must be greatly fewer than we. We have time to prepare. And we have the nobility with us".

"Excepting Europyle".

"Ay, excepting she. Let her decorate a peristyle, so that Morpasia may espy her spy when she enters the city".

I could not help laughing at that. "Nay, sister, I start not mine reign with a deed so unworthy. The Lady Europyle is a great noble. Let her die in battle, like a warrior".

"You will live to regret your charity, Olympias".

"It may be. I know well she has always been an enemy. But enough".

After a space she murmured: "Noticed you there were no young men in that village? Yet were there young women. Mayhap the young men were away hunting. For I hear tell there are valleys beyond that one".

"'Twas why I left the young women, and took merely their elders. We have to think of the future". I fell silent for a space, thinking of mine mother. "It was in my mind to fire the village and kill all living creatures within it. Yet I am Queen and must think of Amazonia's needs".

When later we stripped our mother, it was as I guessed. Her temple had been smashed and by a crude, stone club. It was the greatest mischance imaginable. I sat down and wept and Drusilla with me, for we had loved the gallant lady our mother had been. Yet we both knew it had been quick and she had suffered not at all. Death had come on the instant. In the presence of the Royal Council she was rendered into ash and placed in her ornate urn and taken in procession to the Temple crypt.

Europyle was there too, as in duty bound. I saw Drusilla fingering her dagger, as if she longed to plunge it into Europyle's ribs. I frowned on her and she subsided, with a half-smile. Drusilla's instincts were entirely sound, as you shall hear.

Then, after a decent space, I addressed the Council in this wise. "Now, my noble maids, stand we not here grieving for our Queen. There are things to do, things that may not be deferred". Not one asked what was the meaning of mine words, but nodded gravely, and followed me from the Temple.

However brave a face we put on it before others, in private Drusilla and I grieved mightily. Yet we knew well enough we had little time to grieve, perhaps one night and one day. I had despatched a messenger to Morpasia immediately I had returned to the city, ordering her to return to Themis and take the oath of fealty. This was legitimate, but would I knew anger, and would spell either her doom or mine. I knew she would return and not alone. She would return with an army. Yet, strangely, I did not fear her. There was little point. What had to be done, had to be done.

The guards had been placed before our chamber and we retired, Drusilla and I. We said little, busy with our thoughts. I thought, briefly, of the five maids sleeping beneath the slime, their souls safe in Inanna's keeping. I thought of the choking horror in their lungs, and shuddered. Yet it was better that they should be safe from the vengeful hands of men. I said as much to Drusilla. "You are right, Olympias. They lie in comradeship, safe from the patriarchals. Had I fallen, I would have been content to so lie". I nodded. But I thought most of the Queen.

In retrospect, it was a ridiculous way for a great Queen to die. A raid against primitives, even those wielding stone clubs, was apparently so simple. We had done it often enough, even since I had been with mine mother. It was hardly more than swatting troublesome flies. Yet, as a tearful Drusilla was to say as we held on to each other in our grief, in the privacy of the Palace: "One knows not the hour or the day". It was true enough, but I tell you in all sincerity, the death of mine mother in this way angers me still, ay, even today, many years after the event.

That last raid with mine lady mother is graven in mine memory. It is like a bruise that heals not, even though I know the risks of combat, who better? I often go over the events of that day when I am alone - how she, the Queen, led us up the slope, how we hacked at the timber pallisade with our axes, the javelins crashing against our bodies, and our contemptuous disregard for them, then the charge against the men and the way we cut them down in their blood. It was all so childishly simple. Or should have been.

True, there was danger. There always is, especially when one faces heavy stone clubs. Yet we were highly skilled, and as maids always are, light on our feet despite our armour. Normally this is meat and drink to me, the danger, the excitement of combat. But not on this occasion. What happened to the Queen was an obscenity. Thus my grief for mine mother.

Yet our victory had been complete, as it inevitably would be, our equipment and our courage being so superior. One has to give credit where it is due. The primitives fought despairingly, for they knew us of old. They lived in fear of us, the shining maids from beyond their world. And when, as Queen, I led a similar raid in the years to come, to renew the numbers of our corps of gladiatrices, I found they had dug a great ditch around the village. They were learning the arts of war; and they fought well against me, did the primitives. But they died.

Mine mother would not have minded her death in battle. Often she had spoken of it to me, proudly. She was an Amazon warrior, welcoming death in battle. Yet it galled us, Drusilla and I, that she had fallen before a stone club. It was unfitting. Had she gone down before another maid, a victim of axe or mace, it would have been an honourable end. But this was an enormity, a disgrace that I have never forgiven, and cannot forgive.

All these thoughts rushed through mine head as I lay with Drusilla. Yet gradually we both sank into a sleep, for nature would not be denied. Yet I doubt if either of us slept deeply, untroubled. For we both knew the morrow would be fateful for so many.

The crowning (or as we say, the Hallowing) of an Amazon queen is normally a splendid occasion, followed as it is by feasting, wherein wine flows and food is consumed in great quantity; this is followed by great entertainments in arena and theatre. Yet the crowning of Olympias II was a rushed affair, advisedly so, although everyone looked magnificent in robes appropriate to their rank and station. After I was Queen indeed, which is to say, with the ancient crown of Amazonia on mine head and the regalia in mine hands, it fell to me to address the people. Had it been possible to follow precedent, I was to speak from a high dais erected in the Forum; as it was I spoke from the Palace steps and I resented the necessity. No matter for that, erect in mine golden robes, and wearing the gold crown with its rare stones inset, I spoke in this wise:-

"Dear Maids of Themis, my loyal people, I, Olympias, the second of that name by favour of the great Inanna, Queen of Heaven, pledge my body to our city and state. I further pledge that the usual celebrations attendant upon a coronation will not be denied you. Yet we stand in great danger of attack from a mortal enemy, mine sister, the wicked Reyin Morpasia". A gasp ran around the crowd, followed by a rumble of anger. "Ay, mine good people, harken well to your Queen. The said Morpasia is even now on the march from our satellite city to this with two thousand maids, accoutred as for war, to wrest this crown from my brow, and to make herself your mistress. Such foul treason has not been known, nay, not in the history of Amazonia. You have all good reason to fear Morpasia, having suffered at her hands before the late Queen sent her from this city, at your urging. Now she seeks to extend her cruel governance to the city of Themis, which I will in no wise permit".

From the back of the huge crowd came an angry shout: "Death to the wicked Reyin", and this was taken up universally until the cries bounced off the public buildings lining the Forum. The cries were wrathful and I was much moved. Then, when silence had fallen, I went on in a lower, and softer tone. "Now your Queen asks your aid. I have dedicated this mine body to your service and I will meet Morpasia in mortal combat. Yet I may not do this alone. A Queen's true armour is the love of her people, and in its loving embrace she can triumph. Thus, assured of your hearts, and your great valour, I ask you to return to your homes and there arm yourselves for war and present yourselves here within the space of two hours. For it may not but be that Morpasia's host is halfway to Themis".

I have never seen the Forum clear itself with such rapidity. Indeed, had it not been so serious, it would have been comic.

With my noble maids around me, vociferously protesting their loyalty and eagerness for the fight to come, I ascended with all decent speed. There we parted, they to their luxurious villas to arm themselves, and we to our apartments.

Drusilla gave a grim little smile. "Direct.....pithy" she murmured, "yet containing all needful. How say you, Selene?"

"In truth, Drusilla, and it is in my mind that the day I brought Olympias home from the surface world should be inscribed in letters of gold in the annals of Amazonia. For she has proved herself very Queen".

I went straight to a meeting of the Royal Council, which is made up of one member from each of the thirty noble families. My two sisters sat with me, one on mine right, one on mine left; the rest sat around the oval marble table, looking grave. Indeed, they had a right to look grave, for it was a grave situation. One seat was empty.

"Where is the Lady Europyle?" I enquired, although I guessed the answer.

Corinna raised her head. "Your Majesty, Europyle has gone over to your enemy. The guard on duty at the tunnel entrance was found dead, a dagger thrust through her neck. We thought it meet not to tell you, lest it mar your coronation".

"Ay, 'tis so" Drusilla said drily, but with repressed anger, "Europyle was mighty skilled with her dagger. And the poor maid would have thought no ill at her approach, she being a great noble and holding such high office. The bitch must die".

"The Reyin Drusilla speaks the truth" snarled lovely Philodice. "And now that I consider the matter, and her height, greater than other maids, it is in mine head that a Cro-Magnon dog must have climbed her mother's villa wall and that Europyle.....".

I was inexpressibly shocked. "Nay, hush I pray you. Such talk is unseasonal. Neither Europyle nor her mother are here to defend the honour of their family. And it is a thing impossible as you know well. No surface man has penetrated to this valley these hundreds of years. 'Tis no more than a freak, a sport.....".

Philodice slapped the table in vexation. "Yet is she a most prodigious traitor".

"As she always was" Drusilla added. "I stand with the brave Philodice. Europyle was always Morpasia's creature and her partner in infamy".

"Her spy likewise, doubtless" I remarked with deep bitterness.

"Doubtless.....nay, of a surety" Corinna said, looking around the table. "Thus it behoves us all to go arm ourselves with despatch".

"Especially you, Corinna" warned the ancient Calvina, "for you were ever Morpasia's chiefest enemy and block in this Council".

"I know well she detests me" smiled Corinna, not without disdain. "Yet I fear her not. If we meet in battle, one of us will drop, that is certain. Is there more to say?".

"Nay, nothing more" I responded. "We are all warriors and take that risk. I would ask but one question. Will the maids rally to their Queen?".

They stared at me, astonished. There was pain on Drusilla's young face.

"Are you an Amazon maid, no matter for Queen, and ask that question?

There is not one maid in this room, in all this city, who will not rally to the defence of Olympias". Fists thumped the marble table in assent.

"After your speech today, in villa and house they even now arm themselves for battle. For me, I will defend you, dear sister, with my body's blood, even though I am slain".

"And I likewise" Selene added mildly, as was her wont, "and count it an honour. We have both sworn fealty. As Reyins it is not only our duty but our joy".

I looked into their fearless grey eyes and counted myself the happiest of Queens. Yet was I sad, seeing them in their gold robes and headresses, and knowing well I would soon see them sealed in gleaming metal, and all that would imply.

Corinna slapped the table with her strong hand. "Ay, and that applies in equal measure to your Majesty's Council". There was a full-throated cry of assent. "All here present are noble maids, the Queen's warriors, sworn to defend your person until we fall to the ground, or until victory is gained". She paused, a smile softening the gravity of her face. "It has often seemed to us that your Majesty knows not how greatly she is loved by the nobility, both greater and lower, and the common run of maids. I tell you, there is not one maid in this city of Themis who will not happily lay down her life for your beloved person".

"'Tis so" Calindra supplemented in her gruff fashion, that hid a warm heart, "and even were it not so, which it is, the Reyin Morpasia is hated and feared. The city knows well, ay, very well" - she added by way of emphasis - "what would be our fate were she to slay Olympias, our great and undoubted Queen. It does not bear thinking on. For Morpasia is cruel and a tyrant and I would not wish to live were she to triumph. I speak

under correction, she being your Majesty's sister, yet I view the matter thus - Morpasia must die, for the peace of Amazonia and this city".

"Ay.....ay....." was the chorus from every throat, "the traitor must die.....death to the wicked Reyin".

"And thus" Selene said softly, when the shouting had ceased, "you see, great Queen, how matters stand. Royal house, or noble maids, we are of one mind - Morpasia must die. And if in the achievement of this end all maids here present are marked to die, what then? Are we not warriors?".

"Not to mention" Drusilla pointed out, "your Majesty has never been in any doubt that this matter of the crown would be put to bloody arbitration. Notice of enmity was served on your Majesty many years since, as you will doubtless recall". I recalled.

"I think" I began, speaking carefully, lest I betray emotion, quite unfitting for a Queen of this warlike people, "no Queen has ever had a more loyal Council than Olympias. And I thank you for it. You speak sooth. Morpasia must die. Yet I vow to you that my heart is sick. Never" - and here I became angry, to their great delight - "in the history of our race, nay, not since these matters of state were recorded, has one sister fought another for the crown. 'Tis monstrous, a scandal; yet it must be, since Morpasia wishes it so. Yet I know not how any maid springing from the royal stem could be so steeped in wickedness as to write the doom of so many of our race. For let us not delude ourselves, my loyal warriors; for some of us maids, perhaps even I, the end is near. Within hours our ashes may lie in an urn; for mark me well, this Morpasia is a great warrior, with a bloodlust most damnable, and a skill most diabolical. Yet I, your Queen, will face her in battle and will destroy her, or she me. And I pray to Inanna that Truth and Justice will triumph over wickedness. It must. From now on there will be no pity, no gentle feelings in your Queen. Only an inflexible resolve to slay this wicked Reyin".

When the applause had died, Corinna spoke thus: "Great Queen, what is your will concerning the coming fight? For it appears to me that some plan must be laid".

"Nay, good mine friends. It is more meet that we arm ourselves, even as your families and mine people are doing at this present. You are my counsellors, my chief props, the great ones of Themis. I would have you protected, sealed in plate so that you may give blow for blow to our enemies. Unpreparedness would be folly. And I know right well from your flushed faces and agitated bosoms that like your Queen and her sisters you yearn for the fight". For I had seen that their nipples were as hard as iron, and their bosoms seeming to reach out for danger, after the manner of our race. "For we of the royal house yearn for our arms and armour. And such it is with you, I doubt not. Therefore, go and arm yourselves for war and attend me here in the space of one hour for a Council of War. And while I am armed by mine ladies I will think on a plan of battle, and so report".

And so it was. Our excited and giggling ladies, already in gleaming plate, awaited us. All was in readiness. Myrine took mine gold robes and headress, and mine trusty Lucilla reverently bore away the gold crown to its place of safe keeping. Then, with Charmion aiding me, I donned the padded leather suit, so warm and comforting; after which she encased me in the golden plate until all was ready for war. And despite her great excitement Charmion did all this with despatch and I marvelled at it. She was a fine maid and equally finely equipped.

While my ladies serviced me, Drusilla's ladies, Julia, Tullia and Pelopia, likewise transformed her into a warrior. Drusilla's face was anticipatory yet grim; for I knew she yearned to fight Morpasia. Though a sweet maid, Drusilla carried in her heart a deep and abiding loathing for Morpasia. While I was raised on the surface, Drusilla had been

reared with Morpasia and had suffered considerably. She hated; that I knew. There were old scores to settle and Drusilla fully intended to settle them, one way or the other. Either Morpasia would go down or she would. Finding mine eyes on her, she forced a gay smile, brilliant and dazzling. This was the Drusilla I knew in bed, in the bath, my loving, loyal sister. When I faced Morpasia, I would slay her as a Queen, and for queenly reasons, state reasons. Drusilla's reasons were personal; there was that between them that could be wiped out, not only by blood but by death. This was why she smiled, to cloak the black cloud of hate in her mind. I did not condemn her; I understood and respected her gallant spirit. And truly, she looked so magnificent, in her chased, golden harness that I could not believe she would fall. But I was a warrior too, and knew the realities of combat.

Then something diverted mine attention. It was my ladies. They were still gay but I detected something. They seemed to be growing more intense by the moment. I knew it could not be fear. Amazon maids have no fear of battle. It was not until mine arming was complete, when the hip plates, comforting and firm, had been locked into place, and mine axe and mace hung on the metal belt, that all three went down on one knee before me. Neither Drusilla and I were yet helmed and we exchanged a glance of mild surprise.

"Beloved Queen" Charmion began, in her sweet young voice, "we serve you with great happiness, bringing great honour to our noble families thusly. But if you love us, as our blood flatters us you do, we crave yet one more honour at your hands". Looking again at Drusilla, I raised an eyebrow.

Myrine gave her friend a look of mock-reproach, whilst Lucilla giggled. "Charmion, you are mighty wordy this morning". Then to me she said: "Yet what she would say is this. We fight by your side this day, as by our office and rank we are entitled to do. Yet we three, your ladies, would seek the Lady Europyte and slay the traitor".

"Is not the rose of the royal household on your shields enough danger?" Drusilla wanted to know, but with not a little admiration.

"Faith! No, Reyin. We know well the rose of the royal house will bring us much attention. But that is our glory; and to fall, our eyes growing dark, bearing it, a suitable end for noble maids. Yet to slay the Lady Europyte, thrice-damned traitor that she is, will honour our families the more, and can be inscribed on our urn should we drop during the fight".

"She is a formidable warrior" I reminded them, proud yet fearful for them. "And she fights left-handed".

"The more the danger, the more the excitement" Charmion replied, her eyes shining. And I saw well this was so for them and stole a glance at Drusilla, whose eyes were moist. I saw too that Julia, Tullia and Pelopia stood jealously by, angry that they had not thought of it themselves.

I said, crushing mine emotion: "And this is the wish of you all?".

"It is!". The answer was strong and clear. What could I say? I granted their request.

"And now, Charmion" I said, "you may now helm me", which she did, snapping the rear lock, anchoring the conical helmet to my neck armour. She then arranged the long red plume, that hung luxuriously down my back, its length indicating my high station.

Then it was that Selene came into mine chamber, followed by her ladies, Omphale, Polydora and Lampeto. She too had a request. "This looks much like a conspiracy!" I laughed. "What do you wish at mine hands, Selene?".

"Why, it has occurred to me that to make victory more certain Morpasia should be met in the tunnels and there fought. Those that are cut down

there you will not have to fight in the Forum, where the final battle must of necessity take place. What think you, my Queen?".

"A most excellent idea, Selene. Two hundred picked maids under a trustworthy warrior.....".

"Which will be myself" Selene stated quickly. "'Tis a post of honour which I do greatly covet".

All present bowed to her spirit. "Freely granted, Selene, yet I tell you true, it cannot be that you or your gallant company will survive". There was a chink of metal as she shrugged delicately, so I went on. "So be it. Slay as many as you can, Selene".

Gaily, she answered: "Need you doubt it, dear sister? The more for us, the less for you. When you see Morpasia, you will know that we are all slain".

"'Tis well". My hardness surprised me, but the mantle of queenship weighs heavily. "Those that escape you we will finish in the Forum, and Morpasia's head will decorate me a spear".

"Ay, but" Drusilla said jealously, "leave us some so that we may flesh our maces". Selene laughed, whilst Drusilla took her hand. "O, gallant sister!" she whispered, "may Inanna grant you great strength. Yet do I proclaim myself jealous".

"I know it well" Selene smiled, "yet your honour shall be to remain with the Queen and protect her with your body. That, it seems to me, is an equal honour".

"Ay, and if Morpasia reaches Olympias, it 'twill be because I am slain, that I do swear".

"I had no doubt of it, brave Drusilla".

"Yet" I remarked, "be not too hungry for honour, dear sisters. Remember our love, and try to live".

"You ask much" Selene laughed, "Morpasia must die. Yet" - she reached out and took my hand - "if anything may be done in that regard, rest assured I will do it. For I too am smitten with love. But I think it meet that we part, for time may not be on our side".

She then asked Omphale to helm her, but I put the maid by, taking the gleaming conical helmet from her; and after kissing Selene I placed it on her head, locking it at the rear. She then drew on her gauntlets, saluted me after our fashion and then, the red plume rustling on the smooth armour, left to take up her command. And I marvelled, for she went as eagerly as if she went to meet a lover.

I sighed, turning to Drusilla. "Now, sister, I will do the same for you" which I did. Charmion serviced me in the matter of drawing on my gauntlets and delivering to me my magnificent round shield. Drusilla then came to me and placed the diadem of queenship on mine helmet, so that all maids could see it in the heat of battle and rally to me. The helmet, with its thick leather padding, rested comfortably on mine head, and I said so.

"Ay" Drusilla remarked, her voice sounding hollow from within her casque, "no Queen was better protected. And I thank Inanna that our helmets are made of triple plate, taking due note of Morpasia's mace!".

Everyone laughed at the sally. I dropped mine hands to mine hips testing the weapons for reach, axe on my left, mace on my right. It would be cruel, this fight, I knew well, but the words of the soothsayers were comforting. Yet civil war is always savage and brutal. We were fighting well-equipped, well-instructed maids, not patriarchal tribes. Many of us would die in this day's work, and I hated Morpasia the more I thought of it. Amazons always die bravely, but I damned Morpasia to Tophet in my mind.

"And now" said I, "with Selene and her gallant warriors in place, we have yet time for the Council of War". I turned to mine ladies. "You go the entrance of the Palace and join the other noble maids. The Reyin Drusilla and I, together with mine Counsellors will join you in due time".

The Council Chamber was full. Thirty clenched fists smote breasts in salute. They were all in complete armour, except for their helmets which stood before them on the marble table. Mine eyes strayed proudly to the great mural on the wall of the chamber depicting the battle with the Gorgons when the world was younger, and found similarities in our present situation. Scanning my mind, the others smiled grimly, happy in their Queen. Yet I frowned at the ancient Calvina who I had excused from attendance on grounds of age. She seemed not to notice mine displeasure.

I reported on what had been arranged - that Selene and her warriors should fight Morpasia in the tunnels, thereby contributing to victory. There was a corporate intake of breath. "I have always said that maid was an ornament to Themis" Corinna said admiringly, and there was a unanimous murmur of agreement. Then dismissing the matter she asked: "And what of you, my Queen. What is your will with this battle?"

"Simplest plans are the best". I rose, for I was on fire for combat, as they knew well. "I shall place myself at the head of my warriors and meet Morpasia as she emerges from the tunnels into the Forum. If she reaches that far".

Drusilla murmured: "She will".

"Then will you and I slay her between us twain, Drusilla. This is a matter for the royal house. Is it agreed, my loyal warriors?"

"Nay, by Inanna, it is not agreed!" Corinna announced sharply. I stared incredulously through the slit of mine helmet.

"Indeed your Majesty must do no such thing" grunted Calvina. "I suspected this was in the mind of Olympias, knowing her gallant spirit as we do. I speak bluntly because I have white hair. The Queen's valour is not in question. Her thought must rather be for Amazonia".

Drusilla saw my hands clench and knew I was angry. I like not to be spoken thus to. I was held in check by Calvina's age and the knowledge that she had grown ancient in the service of the royal house. Yet mine eyes raked her with displeasure. "You say.....?"

"I would not have you meet Morpasia until the last thing, when she is greatly wearied, and you fresh". There was a murmur of approval that ran around the table. "We know well the great heart of Olympias, and that she thinks but of honour" Calvina proceeded doggedly, "and it has often seemed to us of the nobility that your Majesty has little care for your life, leaning too heavily on the words of the soothsayers who give you long life. And you desire to fall in battle too greatly. Valour under control is a worthy thing for our Queen, but reckless courage is foolhardy. What would happen to Amazonia should Olympias fall to Morpasia's mace?" and she looked around at the others, who nodded their heads. "Well may you nod. It bears not thinking of".

"What matters it if I fall in combat?" I snapped. "Is there not the Reyin Drusilla?"

"Inanna forbid!" muttered mine sister.

"The Reyin Drusilla is very well. But she is not Olympias" barked the old lady.

Corinna coughed discreetly. "Calvina but says what we all feel, Majesty. You are too precious to expend wantonly. Moreover, bethink you, if you will, of surface history. What monarch was placed in the front line? What of Agincourt fight of which you have spoken to us? Did not the English king Henry V save himself for important business, such as the Constable of France?"

Her appeal to surface history flushed the anger from me, making me laugh. "I can see well that Olympias talks too much. Well, well, let it be as you wish". Everyone relaxed visibly. But I had not finished with Calvina. "As to you, mine ancient Counsellor, and your talk of reckless courage, you give a fine example truly" I said jeeringly. "You sit there in your white hairs, encased in cruel harness and lecture your Queen".

Her smile was twisted. "I am not the Queen. I am a noble whose honour is dear to her. I have no mind to skulk in my villa when there is a fight toward".

"And what if you fall, old friend?"

"Then it must be" came the grim retort. "I shall be in good company".

"Of that" sighed Drusilla, "you may rest assured, Calvina. We fight not patriarchals. We fight our own kind. More to the point, we fight Morpasia".

That was all there was to it. Everyone rose and donned their helmets. The formality had had to be observed but now the serious business was come, and I was glad of it. I knew they had been right but it annoyed me. I had a fever to meet Morpasia in mortal contention. This hunger is common to our race. Natural aggression, and strict training makes us into fighting machines. I waited impatiently as their helmets were locked, and then Drusilla and I led them forth through the great bronze doors.

As we passed on our way, Drusilla sighed: "Thanks be to Inanna the talking is done. Now we can slay that bitch at last".

I laughed and placed my hand on her arm. "When you strike, strike lustily. You take mine love with you".

"I know it well, Olympias".

We went out to the great marble entrance hall, with its rich mosaic floor, and here we found a great gathering of noble maids, dazzling in their golden armour and red plumes. Mine heart stirred with pride at the sight of them. They greeted me: "Hail, Olympias!". One of them, named Sabina, came forward and sank on one knee. "Great Queen, we have all her present, to the number of one hundred and fifty, taken an oath to die rather than leave your side in this fight. For Morpasia is an evil maid, most meet to be slain, the which we trust to encompass by the blood of our bodies. All maids here are of noble birth, and thus the Queen's warriors until death. Thus, for the defence of your royal person, we will fight until our hearts cease to beat".

Much moved, I thanked them for their loyalty. The Royal Council had been right. Every noble maid had rallied to their Queen. Some I recognised by the emblem on their shields; these were the principal members of my nobility. I guessed their villas were deserted on this day, except for plebians who served them who were not trained in arms. It was obvious that mothers and daughters were here, because of the great numbers. I welcomed them all most warmly, both the greater and the lesser nobility. Among the latter I recognised Nerissa, head of my chancery, and Paula, my mother's secretary as she was now mine; their family emblems were wellknown to me.

I was about to lead my maids down the steps to the Forum when there was the sound of running footsteps. The sound was obviously two maids in armour. We waited, and there was much murmuring as two maids pushed their way through the throng, richly armoured. Drusilla placed her helmet close to mine and whispered: "'Tis Europy's mother and sister!".

The two dropped to one knee before me. "Queen Olympias" they said, "we are loyal". I could hear that their voices issuing from their helmets were distressed.

"I doubted it not" I lied. "You are welcome. I bear no malice to you".

"Yet are you tardy" Drusilla pointed out, with venom. "Wherefore?". The mother, likewise named Europyle, was defiant. "The Reyin is unkind towards our house, as always. We come to expiate our shame as soon as we could arm ourselves. We ask you, great Queen, to place us in the front rank of maids so that we may meet the enemy first, and die honourably defending your Majesty from our house's treason. My daughter do I disown".

"And I likewise my sister" mumbled the daughter, "Europyle is a wicked maid".

"Then go" said I, "take up your post. May Inanna strike with you".

They rose, and Drusilla, who never knew when to stop pressing her great advantage, commented drily: "It may be that Europyle will be gentler with you than she will be to us".

"Reyin" spake the mother with asperity, "you know not what you say. The Lady Europyle has iron in her soul and will spare not her family who stand against her for Queen and Amazonia".

They turned and hurried down the Palace steps to face their certain end. "Hmm!" was all Drusilla said, but I heard the other maids chuckle, and said nothing.

I then led the nobles through the columns, and down the steps. Below, the Forum was crammed with silver armoured maids who, at the sight of the solid phalanx of golden armour erupted into a roar of welcome. "Hail to Olympias, our undoubted Queen". I graciously acknowledged their loyalty, whilst being greatly moved. Permit me to speak proudly. The population of Themis, if one included the plebeians, was five thousand. Since the plebeians are the servant class and do not bear arms, I knew that crammed into our great Forum, and in the streets leading off it were more than four thousand of my subjects. They were fine warriors all, this I knew, warlike and brave, so bred up. And I had no doubt that I would triumph in this fight, for I had numbers on my side. From this moment on I had no doubts; in company such as this who could question victory.

I marshalled them in readiness for the onslaught that we all knew were coming. As they had wished, Europyle's mother and sister were at the front, doubtless with understandable trepidation, if also with great courage. I also placed a noble maid at various places within the great ranks of silver, knowing full well the psychological benefit that would accrue from this to the ordinary run of maids, giving them a person to rally around when battle was joined. One of those I sent was Calindra, a Counsellor I loved dearly but who I knew to be a great warrior of vast experience. She and I knew she was going to her death but she went from me gaily, as every Amazon maid embraces danger. "A sound decision" was Drusilla's whispered comment, "she is a strong and gallant warrior". I kept the bulk of the nobles around me as was prudent; if the day went against us they would be mine bulwark at the end.

After all this was achieved, came the waiting and that was the worst of all. We all felt it. The fight is preferable; combat in hot blood is nothing. Death, if it comes, comes quickly, and is for us an occupational hazard. But waiting.....ah, that is terrible. To make it worse for a long time nothing was heard from below. Then, quite suddenly, we heard a hoarse shout, then faintly came the sound of weapons against harness, iron against metal. It had a distinctive sound. A corporate sigh ran around the Forum. Then came the first muffled scream. Drusilla laughed her hard little laugh: "It has begun, my friends. Would I were there!". Corinna said softly: "Alas! Poor Selene!". I did not know until that moment, that Corinna loved her. For a good hour the fight went on below, coming closer and closer. Selene and her warriors were putting up a stout resistance. Yet the cries of stricken maids became more frequent. Calvina growled: "I hope some of those cries are enemy cries!".

"Whilst they are in the tunnels" remarked Paula deferentially, "maid to maid, they have equal chances. But when they are beaten back into the great chamber, they are urn-fodder. You say truth, Reyin, we should be there".

Nerissa muttered: "I grow cold from this waiting".

"Battle nerves!" sneered Drusilla.

I smiled within my casque and placed a gleaming hand on Nerissa's shoulder, for she was young. More kindly I said: "You will be warm enough later on".

"Or cold for ever" Corinna supplemented, with a chuckle.

"What matters it" barked Calvina, "as long as we take those traitorous bitches with us".

"And what can you do, Calvina?" enquired Drusilla disagreeably for her. "I doubt me your old hand can raise your mace, let alone strike with it!".

"We shall see, Reyin" returned Calvina, mildly. "You may be surprised in ancient Calvina".

This pre-battle bickering was frequent among us and Calvina understood well, having gone through it often in her long life. She knew Drusilla meant no ill, and knew equally that she would come to her aid if it were possible in the heat of battle. There was nothing mean about mine sister, but her tongue tended to be sharp when kept from combat. Calvina, who had known her since birth, loved this bellicosity in her, for Drusilla was one who had courage to back up her brave words.

For myself I was completely calm. This is a quality which if a Queen has it not, she must counterfeit. Every decision she makes in war must be based on reason, not emotion. I stood on the second of the Palace steps, shield on left arm, and gazing over the forest of conical helmets, looking for some sign of Morpasia's force. But so far there was nothing. Drusilla turned and looked up at me. "Anything?".

"Nothing. Be patient, sister".

"Why, I am, Olympias. But I yearn to flesh my mace".

"I know it, sister. I too long to see mine mace run with enemy blood".

"It cannot be too long deferred. Unless I mishear in my helmet, the noise from below grows less".

"Ay, and maidenly cries fewer. 'Tis close indeed".

"Think you the gallant Selene is slain?".

"Of a surety. How could it be otherwise?".

Then, as quickly as it started, it ended and all maids in the Forum drew their maces and raised their shields in readiness. To the enemy when they emerged from below, climbing the sloping passage, it would look like a solid wall stretching back the whole length of the Forum, enough to daunt anyone except Morpasia. I saw my front ranks with knees bent, expectant, grimly eager, maces at the ready. It was a fine sight for a Queen to see.

Then I spied a solitary golden figure. Drusilla heard mine intake of breath. She turned sharply. "'Tis she?".

"'Tis she. With a yellow plume".

"Better than loyal red for such as she".

"Ay".

Not far behind Morpasia, was a taller figure in golden armour, likewise yellow plumed. I called Myrine, Charmion and Lucilla to me and pointed

her out to them. They gurgled with delight. "There stands your prey. Go now, brave maids, and fulfil your vow".

"We go, noble Olympias. We will lay her head at your feet" cried Lucilla.

"Ay, that will we" the others announced in unison.

I watched them go, pushing forward through silver maids until the press became so great that they had perforce to stop, an island of gold in a sea of silver. They were in a good position to reach the traitor when occasion offered. I murmured: "Brave maids!".

Nerissa nodded: "But too eager. 'Tis not a game. They are well protected but I fear me.....".

I did not reply; I was too busy watching Morpasia. By now I saw what her tactic was, and I did not like it. I should have foreseen it but I did not. Shame to me, a warrior Queen. I swore.

Drusilla turned: "What ails you?".

"A wedge, the bitch has formed a wedge, tight packed with maids. Herself at the head. You know well how difficult it is to break open a wedge. And what the cost will be".

There was suppressed excitement in Drusilla, that I could hear. "It will avail her little. Her force cannot be that large now".

"A thousand as I judge".

"Well then, we are four, so what ails you sister? We have the courage to smash that wedge. Command us".

It was then that Morpasia started to advance, and she came in a fierce charge. The violence of it split the silver maids. It was like a thorn entering a hand. Then I saw the bitch had armed her people not with ridged or spike maces as was common among us but maces with a single ball of iron. I told Drusilla; she laughed brittly.

"Ay, she would. She always favoured it I mind. It was not adopted for it was felt it was too cruel a weapon. This is total war, Olympias. Look to yourself. 'Tis you she seeks".

"And you likewise, sweet sister".

"True". And she laughed.

From my vantage point I saw the tight packed wedge, a solid mass of shields and flailing maces. In that first violent charge they had penetrated deeply into my loyal maids, and were halfway across the Forum. I saw Calindra rallying them on her side of the wedge, and another noble maid Zeta on the other side. I blessed them both. They stood again, shield against shield, maces crashing down. Yet red plumes were falling at an alarming rate, making me pay mental tribute to Morpasia's skill as a commander.

I despatched a dozen noble maids to shore up that wavering line. "Six to Calindra, six to Zeta" I shouted, "and split that cursed wedge at whatever cost". They went and I watched anxiously; the arrival of fresh eager warriors of high quality worked wonders. The wedge wavered, then bent inwards and finally, when the pressure became too intense, split in twain. This was the turning point of the battle; yet not one of those twelve maids survived to tell their daughters of it. But that is how war is.

The noise was frightful, it bounced off the stately buildings that lined the Forum, it echoed around our helmets; I thanked Inanna that the thick protective padding that covered mine head, including the ears, dimmed the shouting and screams of dying maids. What I did hear, and that was much, I ignored as did everyone else. From the highest to the lowest we were battle-hardened; all maids knew war is not for children but for gallant maids who accept the brutalities of mortal combat. Yet for many of us the end was very near.

I regarded Morpasia with grudging admiration. I knew what she was thinking. "Can I but slay that bitch Olympias, I can still carry the day". I said as much to Drusilla.

She laughed brittly: "Ay, the traitorous bitch gives herself airs".

"She is a great warrior".

"So am I" came the proud reply. "And so are you, Olympias, and all loyal noble maids gathered around us. And 'tis as our beloved mother always said, in combat one maid is as good as another".

True as this was, Morpasia had chosen her force well. The combat was savage for they fought with desperation. From where I stood overlooking the battle, the air seemed black with flailing maces, and the air heavy with cries of pain. Now, it is necessary for a Queen to detach herself, as far as possible, from a battle, because ultimately it is her life that is sought. Morpasia could clearly see me where I stood and doubtless yearned for me as I yearned for her. But our time was not yet; when it was, either she or I would die. In the meantime I was merely a spectator, singularly unmoved as I later reflected in shame. Thus, with iron self-control I saw maids fall, heard them gasp, cry out when they were stricken and their dying wail as they dropped.

The scenes I saw are etched blackly in my memory, and always will be. My joy when I saw a yellow plume fall, my sadness when I saw a red plume reel back, arms wide flung. The noise of the battle was so great that to me, sealed as I was, this seemed to happen without sound. Yet I knew it could not be so.

I glanced at Drusilla, sensed her impatience, and smiled. I knew her sinews cracked with desire for Morpasia. I saw how her right hand clenched and unclenched around the haft of her mace. Like mine own, it was thickly, cruelly ridged; both us eschewed spikes, preferring the brutal force of the ridged weapon. I gloried in Drusilla's powerful right arm as she in mine. I knew that, whichever way it went, she would give more than a good account of herself. I tore my eyes away from the sister I loved.

There were many cameos that remain in mine memory as I write this. One, of an unfortunate and foolish noble maid, resplendently golden, allowing herself to be separated from her comrades. I watched her being beaten back by four yellow plumes to the steps of the Hall of Records. Then on to them. She fought well, bravely but I knew she was doomed. Who she was I did not then know; I knew she was rich, for her armour was chased, as was mine and Drusilla's. But that was nothing, for many nobles had their equipage so decorated, as it trumpeted their rank and wealth. I learned only after the battle the identity of this foolish maid - it was Lampeto, Drusilla's lady-in-waiting. She had one great success. One yellow plume spun and plunged from the steps, head first. Then Lampeto failed to block a mace blow with her shield, it striking her helmet, high up. She fell back, stunned. The three yellow plumes were on her immediately, maces smashing into her breast plate. Suddenly I saw the golden legs jerk up violently, then fall back limply, arms still and wideflung. It was only later the surgeons told me that her breastbone had been smashed in. Again I despatched four golden maids to deal with the yellow plumes. They did, but only three returned.

I looked for mine three maids, rejoicing to see them intact, still trying to reach Europyle. By now the point of the wedge was quite close to where the nobility stood awaiting the onslaught. The fact that Morpasia was still on her feet astonished me, but she was immensely strong and on that day her reputation fought for her. Many maids confronted her, only to pay the price. I marvelled at the self-sacrifice, for as one maid fell, another took her place without hesitation. Do you wonder at my pride of Queenship? Morpasia was buoyed up by determination and hatred; yet I saw how scarred and beaten her harness was, and knew how weary she

she must be. Yet it made no difference. I glanced, as I often did, at Drusilla, likewise hate-filled, tense, knees slightly bent awaiting the longed-for moment of combat. It was very near. I did not speak. She could not have heard me in the din of battle.

Now, quite suddenly, behind Morpasia the battle thinned. Yellow plumes were going down quickly now. I rejoiced. Through the eye slit in mine casque I saw a flash of gold. Mine maids! I had almost forgotten them. They were still there, on their feet, smashing their way to Europyle. It was easier now. Suddenly Lucilla gallantly leapt forward. Europyle's mace crashed down and Lucilla dropped. I felt nothing; it is the chance a warrior takes. Perhaps the maid was not dead. I hoped not, for her hands had magic in them. That left Myrine and Charmion, who leapt on their comrades to reach the traitor. Europyle was virtually alone and knew she was a dead maid. The battle was lost, but there was nowhere to run even if, as a noble, she could have done. Before she could have reached the tunnel she would have been maced to death. So she stood and fought, for she had nothing to lose. Before her were two more of the royal household, with the rose on their shields. She could also identify them from the emblems on their helmets. I dimly heard her roar of defiance. She was a strong and doughty warrior; had she not been she would not have lasted as long as she had.

What transpired I shall always remember. I stepped down from the steps for I knew that victory was assured. All that remained was Morpasia. I had to meet her in battle. That was expected of a Queen; yet between me and her still stood a solid phalanx of gold. I had time to watch Europyle die, and I have to say it was a worthy one of a noble Amazon.

There was a great flurry of blows. I heard Myrine's piercing scream, saw her reel back helplessly, uncontrollably, until she fell. For a long moment she writhed, moaning, blood dripping from where her helmet joined her neck armour. Then she died. I swore fruitlessly, pitying, for we too had achieved mutual bodily pleasure.

Only Charmion was left. I now remembered what Nerissa had said, and I feared, in a detached way for the chief of mine maids. I prayed to Inanna, silently. For Europyle and Charmion it was a fight to the death. Nobody interfered; no silver maid dared when two nobles fought, and a noble's code of honour prevented it. Beyond the two combatants, silver maids were milling about finishing off any yellow plume with life in her. My worries were really over. From now on it was the business of the Queen and the nobility. The silver maids had done their part. Yet Europyle was a great danger as long as she lived. Unless Charmion could finish the bitch, I would have to. So I watched their fight closely.

Charmion was young, strong and brave; Europyle older, full of battle craft and viciousness. Then we who watched saw Charmion take a blow to the side of her helmet. It was so fierce I thought for sure she was done for; she staggered it is true but then flung herself at Europyle, mace crashing down. Europyle cried out in pain and drooped briefly. Corinna muttered: "Thanks be to Inanna, she has the bitch!". Charmion thought so too for she let loose another attack at her enemy; Europyle swayed backward much hurt, but she did not fall. Charmion struck again, but this time Europyle partially blocked it with her shield. Then, horrified, we saw Europyle's iron ball swing round in a vicious arc, striking the gleaming conical helmet at the side, high up, and the blow was savage.

The conical shape, what you call a bascinet, had evolved with us, just as one the surface, to deflect blows and for the most part, with the triple plate, one was safe from injury. But there are places where a crushing blow is fatal, as near the temple; and it was here that Europyle had struck. It was not a cowardly blow; every warrior knows the risks when she goes into battle. Charmion shuddered to a stop, drooping, and groaning in great distress. We heard Europyle laugh. She did not strike again, there was no need. She knew Charmion was finished.

Charmion turned, retching. She coughed horribly; and we all gasped, used to sudden death as we were, for through the ventilation holes in her casque blood ran in a steady stream, dripping from her chin on to her breastplate. Then it increased in volume, merging into one thick stream that reached her hip plates. Those of us who could watched entranced. There was nothing we could do for the poor maid and nobody moved. Shield and mace dropped from nerveless fingers and she started to stumble towards us and I knew she could not see. The gold arms were outstretched to me, like a child, hurt in play, runs to her mother. She stumbled on, like someone worse for wine; then she cried out in anguish, quite forgetting my rank in her extremity.

"O, Olympias.....beloved Queen.....I am slain".

Beside me I heard Calvina give a little sob. "Inanna, mother of compassion, take her spirit.....take the gallant Charmion to your bosom".

Even as she spoke, Charmion's spirit fled. Spinning on her heel, she fell backward, her head crashing into Myrine's shield. The golden legs jerked twice and then she was terribly still.

Nerissa jeered: "Did she think to live forever?".

I reproved her sharply: "She was a brave maid".

"Truly, great Queen. Yet is she slain. And I beg her harness, when she is stripped".

Although disgusted by her cruelty, I said: "'Tis yours, Nerissa, if you live the day through".

Now Europyle, spattered with Charmion's blood, leapt over her to reach me. She snarled: "And now, mongrel Queen, you die likewise". Nothing loth, I lifted mine shield and took a grip on mine mace. I would see the end of the bitch once and for all.

Quick as I was, Nerissa was quicker and leapt in front of me. "Bitch" she snarled, "you reach the Queen through me!".

I jumped forward to put her by, but Corinna caught me by the arm. "Nay, my Queen, be not so hasty. Nerissa is good. Believe it".

Meanwhile, Europyle snarled: "'Tis well, maid. Die then, since you wish it".

Nerissa ducked under Europyle's blow; where it fell, she was not. Her spiked mace whirled, crashing into the traitor's shoulder, who squealed in pain. Her shield sank but it puzzled me why Nerissa had attacked her shield arm instead of the mace arm. As a result Nerissa took a blow to the helmet; but then her mace whirled again and the spiked head crashed upwards under Europyle's jaw, jerking her head back. The bitch shrieked; I had heard the bone break, and was not surprised to see her knees buckle. Nerissa helped her on the way with a more orthodox blow to the head. Europyle's groans were pitiable, had I any pity to spare. Nerissa stood over her like an avenging angel.

"Beg your Queen's forgiveness and I despatch you quickly".

The wroak was agonised but definite and audible: "Never!".

"Then traitor, die in your treason".

Nerissa struck her thrice, vengefully, once on the occiput. Europyle pitched forward. She did not twitch, she did not jerk, she just lay, blood streaming from her helmet. I was in awe of such demoltion by a young maid, not even of the higher nobility. She would have to be so when time offered itself. Such a deed merited much advancement. Right now Nerissa was drowned in congratulations, mine as well as those of other maids, acknowledged warriors of high rank.

I had little time to contemplate Europy's dead body; we were in great danger. The cursed Morpasia had fifty warriors left and at their head she was making superhuman efforts to reach me. I sent the noble maids in to destroy them. "Slay, slay, lay them in their gore" I commanded, and they went gladly. I kept old Calvina, Corinna and Nerissa by me. A hundred nobles were more than capable of destroying fifty common maids.

Calvina growled: "The bitch should be dead by now! It may not be that she is flesh and blood".

"She is a ferocious warrior, Calvina, the finest Amazonia has produced". I was bitter when I added: "Why could she not have been a good sister?".

"Why indeed?" muttered Calvina.

Corinna turned to me. "Your time is near, my Queen. May Inanna aid you!".

I knew well enough and was eager for our long deferred meeting. Morpasia was smashing her way to me with single-minded venom. But before me there was Drusilla. That would be a battle worth the seeing. I looked at mine brave noble maids. How they fought! I saw Paula destroy a yellow plume. I heard her gleeful laugh, that ended in a groan as she went down before a flailing mace.

In her cruel, sardonic way, Nerissa remarked: "You need another secretary, my Queen. That was a death blow".

Maybe it was because they were cornered rats that the yellow plumes fought so well; and as I saw some of the best blood of Amazonia fall before these common maids, I was angered. But ultimately they died. In our corner of the Forum the battle was bitter and the blows of the utmost ferocity, against which no armour was entirely proof. But I could see that Morpasia was now isolated. Another noble dropped before the bitch, then at last Morpasia and Drusilla faced each other, sister against sister. Drusilla was magnificent, fresh and eager but Morpasia, buoyed up by hate, and knowing she still had a slim chance to slay me was a super-maid.

When their shields crashed together, I was amazed at the venom with which the sisters fought. There were old scores to settle, and the hatred was frenzied. I, even I, was chilled at the insults they hurled at each other; Morpasia's were of a vileness that shocked me, for they included me for the allusions were to Drusilla's love for me, and mine for her. In battle it is always kill or be killed, yet this savagery was remarkable. Only one would survive. Drusilla knew it. She had not spoken of death to me. No Amazon maid does; the subject is beyond the pale.

This went on for a very long time, and I was conscious of a foolish impatience for battle. I flicked it aside. I only had eyes for Drusilla, though being human I surveyed the scene from time to time. I had sent in a hundred noble maids. Of these I was glad to see about fifty or sixty remained on their feet, while on the ground others moved weakly, like golden crabs seeking to rise, while others lay terribly still. All this meant little to me, for it is part of being a warrior, the chances of combat. Yet I was conscious of muffled groans but even with this I could not be concerned. A Queen has many privileges. One of them is to be defended by other maids, they holding it a privilege to die for their Queen. But for Drusilla I cared much. She was mine lover. I adored her and she me. Yet above her passion was her duty as Reyin. I watched, therefore, proudly yet anxiously, as she fought lustily. I worshipped the great heart of her, and, as is common in our race, I would much prefer that she die gloriously than live a craven. Perhaps even on the surface that can be accepted as a kind of love.

It went on for a long time, the thud of mace against harness, whether it was shield or body armour; blow for blow was exchanged. Both gasped and cried out, but did not fall. Nor did they move overmuch. With all the dead and wounded around it was not possible, but within their circum-

scribed area, all was action.

It was exciting to us to see these two maids, bitter enemies, plumes rasping proudly as they contested. Yet it was a fight to the death. The battle was over, and blood-spattered, hard-breathing members of the nobility stood around, maces in hand, watching the royal household make the last stand. I could have ordered them in to mace down Morpasia from behind but it was a question of honour. So they stood, admiringly, watching the royal sisters slay each other. This is what it had been from the beginning - a fight for the crown.

Someone, I forget who, croaked: "By Inanna, this is a fight to treasure!".

Our mother had always said to us: "Dear children, fear not death. 'Tis so easy to die when you have to". This is true; as an Amazon warrior, I tell you so. I have myself been stricken in combat. When the dark mists hover around you, and you are stricken, the ground achieves the status of a friend, and you are happy enough to embrace it. But in war, this means the urn (or in your terms, the tomb or the grave). All this Drusilla knew. Maybe she too wanted to fall for she was much hurt. But she did not. We all wondered how long it could last. Then mine heart lurched in mine breast.

Drusilla cried out in pain, staggered but came back. Yet that blow to side of her casque had taken its toll and Morpasia knew it. I heard her croak: "You die, sister! Yet be contented; you are a brave maid". There was a flurry of blows and Drusilla took two good mace blows, at the top of the head, where the red plume tossed proudly. Drusilla reeled, yet came back, this time tiredly as I could see.

"Alas" whispered Calvina, "'tis over".

I cursed her savagely, bidding her keep her dirty mouth shut. Love and fear made me speak thus; my contrition was immediate, but words once uttered cannot never be withdrawn.

Morpasia's mace whirled yet again and smashed into the side of Drusilla's helmet just above her ear, as I judged. Her cry was that of a stricken animal. I watched blood spray out from the ventilation holes of her helmet. Calmly I heard myself say: "She is indeed finished, Calvina. Mine sweet Drusilla is gone from me". We saw her shoulders droop, her shield sink, her mace arm fall. She was at Morpasia's mercy and that bitch, seeing her sister's body exposed, struck her a mighty blow on the breast. The thud of iron against harness was dull and Drusilla seemed to shudder from the shock, and sank to her knees. Morpasia stepped back and smashed her to the ground with another blow. Drusilla wailed just once and lay still on her face. Morpasia leapt on her body to reach me.

Unhesitatingly my three companions stepped in front of me. Morpasia snarled to Calvina: "Old fool, what do you here?!" and felled her. Her dreaded mace swung in an arc and Nerissa went flying. Corinna closed with Morpasia and there was a short and brutal exchange and mine trusted Counsellor dropped dead with a thin wail. From the spectators, behind Morpasia I heard an incredulous cry: "The brave Corinna is slain!".

Until I die I shall always have a vision of Morpasia's scarred armour, her weary, tottering footsteps, the hatred that did not retreat an inch. Then we were together, she and I. "At last.....mongrel bitch..... I send you to Tophet". And to be fair she nearly did. Strangely I had no fear, just a cold rage. My life belonged to my people, and if necessary I would give it for them. It was mine duty and mine wish. Yet, with Drusilla gone, were I slain, only Morpasia would be left of the royal house and that was a fate I had to spare the city. I had to triumph for their sake, if not for mine own.

She struck me hard and true on mine helmet. I completely failed to take it even partially on mine shield, for her speed was extraordinary. There had been an earlier, first blow that had dazed me, although it glanced

away. But this blow was accurate and savage. No one who has/taken such a blow, even to a stoutly protected head, can imagine the effect. Blood gushed from mine nose and I seemed to float in a sea of nausea. Mine mouth hung loosely open, and I felt the hot sweetness of mine life blood in mine throat. I groaned and as if from afar I heard her cruel laugh. "I send you to join your bed-fellow". There was a rushing in mine ears, like the roaring of many waters and I sank, moaning to one knee. I was helpless, at her mercy. She struck again and again; yet because mine helmet was conical, and she desperate with weariness, many glanced away.

Then, and not before time, I bethought me and raised mine shield over mine head, whereat she cursed. The blows rained on the shield, so hard that mine left arm was jarred right up to the socket. I was still much hurt, with much difficulty in seeing through the blood that streamed from a head wound. It was not that much, merely broken skin on the forehead, yet it bled profusely. Gradually my vision cleared. I had not begun well, and was angry with myself, for I had scarcely landed a blow on the bitch.

All this, which takes much time to relate, happened in a short time. They tell me that the royal diadem around mine helmet, though battered, remained intact, which all maids took to be an omen of great import. For from those times lost in the mists of antiquity when mine great predecessor, Alethea, fought and slew Medusa, after a tremendous combat, great store has been placed on queenly valour. My nobles watched my speedy demolition with horror but no one of them would intervene. This I knew beyond peradventure. Either Morpasia would die, or Olympias would.

The first part of our combat had gone Morpasia's way; she had the advantage. It is often so when two warriors of equal skill and strength meet. The one who gets in the first blow has a tremendous advantage. Yet mortal combat can often swing back the other way, as, praise be to Inanna, now happened.

I will be honest with you who read mine words. Despite mine splendid harness, because of the hurts to mine body, the flame of valour burned low. I was well disposed to die, though I say it with shame, and wanted nothing so much as to lie on the cruel ground. Then something mighty strange happened. I peered out from the slit in mine helmet and it was by chance mine gaze fell on Drusilla's prostrate body, gleaming still, yet horribly besmirched about the head. And seeing it, anger flooded into me. Mine nobles tell me I let out a roar of rage and rose, as if propelled by a spring, carrying the fight to Morpasia with a savagery that had rarely been seen. We stood shield to shield trading blow for blow. It was of course brutal and both of us cried out in pain. Yet I felt strong and it seemed to me that Drusilla's spirit had entered mine body and together we fought our wicked sister. At any event we fought with ferocity, Morpasia and I. I heard her grunt and then something suspiciously like a whimper issued from her battered helmet. I felt invincible and laughed aloud. I croaked: "'Tis you who die, sister. May your black soul find no rest". She fought on, doggedly, though weakly. I knew I had her. Everyone sensed it, and there cries of joy. My mace smashed down on her head and blood spurted; I was splattered with it as I raised my mace yet again. Her yellow plume suddenly changed colour, glistening redly. I had heard her shriek and had laughed aloud. She made one last effort, one supreme effort, which made me give ground, so savage was it. I heard her breath rasp in her throat, the last weak insult almost inaudible, so little breath had she.

Morpasia's luck had run out; or rather, she had used it all up in the first phase of our fight. Her last vicious blow, had it struck mine head where she had intended would, armour or no armour, have settled Olympias for good. But seeing it coming, I stepped aside. She missed badly and I heard her curse. Her mace struck mine hip plates and glanced away; and because she was tired, she was unbalanced and followed through with it. Her head and trunk were level with mine waist. I struck her sending her

staggering forward. I now had all the time in the world, and I laughed in pure joy. I struck her the final time with all my strength on the back of the head, that is to say, the occiput. My blow slammed the metal against her skull. I plainly heard it crack as she went down moaning. The sound was honey to mine ears. I could have maced her to death but she had to pay, and pay publicly. As you say on the surface, I believe, 'justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done'. She had played for the highest stakes and had lost, narrowly it is true. Morpasia knew I would have to execute her. Was I not the Queen. I stared down, almost gluttonously, as she lay moaning softly. My metal foot was on her mace, that today hangs in the royal armoury.

Cry not 'brutality', you surface dwellers. We know well you do far worse in your vaunted 'civilisation'. You have wiped out whole populations at the press of a switch, and justify it. When you look back at your own history, when you fought as we fight, you hold up your hands in horror, and call it 'brutality'. To which I reply 'physician, heal thyself'; for I tell you true, when we whom you call Neanderthal fight it is indeed violent and bloody, yet it is maid to maid, the old valuation. It is personal, valorous, clean and wholesome. We maids venture our bodies for the pure excitement of combat, pitting our skill and valour against others of our kind, and do not whine like curs when we are beaten and lie stricken on the field. For we know that one maid has to drop, and when it is your turn you do not whimper. Especially is this so with we of the nobility; for us to fall in battle is glory indeed, no shame. Had I dropped before Morpasia's mace I would not have whined. Nor did she. I do her that justice; as one warrior to another I speak it.

I turned and saw that Nerissa was on her feet. I was glad to see the slayer of Europyle alive. When time served I would lift her high but for now I gave her what was, to her as to any Amazon maid, the honour of attendance upon her Queen. Grittily I ordered: "Unhelm this bitch!".

Now, Nerissa could have laid her shield and mace on the ground, removed her gauntlets and fiddled with the lock to Morpasia's helm. I knew Nerissa would not do the traitor this courtesy. I watched as her spiked mace smashed the lock, while Morpasia groaned; then she tore the casque from mine sister's head, confiscated her mace and shield and turned her over with her foot.

Incongruously enough, Nerissa remarked conversationally: "My head aches somewhat!".

I nearly laughed at the sally: "I doubt it not!".

I stared down at Morpasia. Blood glistened in the dark hair and covered her face. Well, what of that? Mine own face was bloody also. Yet through it all, her patrician beauty remained. It was as if I stared into a reflective glass. Now fully conscious, malice contorted her face. Not a word, black or white, did she speak. So I did it for her, moistening my throat with spittle: "You know you must die, sister. I will do it quickly". Her smile was derisory. There was no white blood in the royal house. The stakes had been of the highest and she had failed; she knew what had to follow. I replaced mine mace and handed the shield to Nerissa, who bowed at the honour. I bent down, taking Morpasia's hair in mine left hand. She spat upwards, the spittle cracking against mine helmet. I tightened mine grip and heard her squeal. I dragged her without ceremony across the Forum to the steps of the Hall of Records, where Lampeto's blood was still trickling down. Indeed, the last thing Morpasia saw on earth was Lampeto's golden legs. The track left by Morpasia's armoured legs is still visible today. Staring up at me, eyes full of hate still, she shrielled: "Curse you, Olympias.....curse you to Hell!". I drew my double-headed axe, gleaming and sharp. I held it close to her face. Her eyes did not flinch. I forced her neck down the sharp step. "This is for Drusilla". The axe fell, severing her head.

Her trunk fell back, blood pouring from the neck, jerking a little. I raised the dripping head for the maids to see. The lips still moved in death. "Thus do all traitors to Themis die", I cried.

There was a great shout, bouncing off the buildings lining the Forum. "Hail to Olympias, our undoubted Queen. May the Queen live for ever". The traditional acclamation for a Queen thrilled me to the core.

I ordered a spear to be brought and ordered an ordinary maid to impale my sister's head on it. And when the head was set up for all to vilify, I crossed with my nobles to the Palace steps and then made an extempore speech, thanking them all for their fidelity and that I would in all ways be a good Queen to them.

I then took a deep breath. It felt good in mine lungs. "As for all those with the yellow plumes, have them stripped and their bodies cast from the walls for the nourishment of the monsters". There was a howl of joy. "And yet, for all those who wear the red plumes of Themis, let them be gently looked to, and let our white sisters of compassion restore to life those whom they may, however grave their wounds and of whatever caste they be. It is most meet that our sisters who fought so valiantly this day should receive all the succour which our science is able to bestow".

And so it was. I looked around and saw my nobles had sunk exhausted and it was impossible to determine who lived for the living and dead were inextricably mixed. Some had climbed the Palace steps until they could drag themselves no further and sunk down in very weariness. The fight had been sharp and brutal and I blamed them not.

Already the medical fraternity - our White Amazons - were going around bringing solace and help to the fallen. Yet their robes were no longer white but horribly stained. I called two to me and led them below to the tunnels, Nerissa by mine side. The said Nerissa gave a strangled cry when she looked on the carnage. Red plumes and yellow lay in deathly profusion, stretching far into the tunnels. I was searching for one body in particular, one in golden armour, the adored Selene. And I found her, where she had doubtless fallen back against the wall, body inclined sideways, mace still in her hand. Her head wound seemed to me fatal, and I wept. Her helmet had been split open by repeated blows and blood covered the side of it, from whence it had dripped onto her shoulder and down her arm and into her gauntlet, the leather of which was black where it should have been brown. Wordlessly I pointed and one of the sisters knelt, unlocking the helmet. She withdrew it carefully, then with great gentleness probed the wound, pursing her lips. I waited anxiously for the judgement. "I am not sure, Majesty" she stated quietly, "and until we can inspect her with our equipment cannot be so; yet it appears to me that the skull is broken. That can be restored with our skill. If the brain is not badly damaged.....".

"Then do it and be assured of your Queen's favour for all time".

I watched them bear her away with some hope in mine heart. Nerissa tugged my arm: "Thank Inanna that the great Selene is of our race and not one of the egg-shell maids of the surface. With such treatment a Cro-Magnon maid's skull would have shattered into a thousand fragments". She was right of course and I forced a smile.

We heard a faint whimper from behind us and we saw a yellow plumed body move. "One of the bitches lives, my Queen! I beseech you, great Olympias, let me terminate her".

"Do so, Nerissa. And let your blow be for Selene".

I watched her blow, and it was good. The bitch moved no more.

Returning to the Forum, I ignored what was happening to the yellow plumes. Mine orders were being executed with zest. But I realised for the first time the scale of disaster to mine own people, especially the nobles. The number of red plumed maids laying on the ground chilled me. Yet what could be done was being done by the White Amazons.

I ordered Drusilla lifted. I watched as two bodies were pulled from her. There is something pitiable about lifeless bodies when they are dragged limply from where they lie, especially when they are your courtiers, and you know them well. When Drusilla was lifted there was blood on the paving stones where her head had been. I wailed as if I had been struck by a mace. I loved her so. The White Amazons were totally unmoved as they carried her away with no more respect than had she been an animal carcass. Her golden-metalled body still dripped blood and I yelped: "Treat mine sister with care. 'Tis understood?". They stared at me surprised, but nodded.

I stood, grieving as Myrine and Charmion were dragged unceremoniously away, then Paula and the others who had died for me so willingly. I ordered their bodies were to be delivered to their families when this could be done. Mine heart lurched in my bosom when I bethought me that Calindra, Charmion's mother, was almost certainly dead likewise. I said to Nerissa: "Come, we seek Calindra".

"My Queen" the maid murmured, "why do you torture yourself so?".

"I must, Nerissa. 'Tis my duty. I am Queen".

I by-passed Calvina, battered but living.. She was on her knees, inclined forward, still holding shield and mace limply. I knew that, despite her age, she had done her duty in the last minutes of the fight; yet I heeded not the moaning that issued from her helmet. Morpasia had been right, she should not have been there. I left her to the nursing order.

I stepped over other bodies, recognising them from their family emblems on their helmets. Some, I thanked Inanna, yet lived. To all I said: "Help comes; hold on to life". Yet some I stepped over were beyond aid. I remembered what Paula had said, urn-fodder. Wending mine way through the field of honourable if stricken maids, I came at last to Calindra, mine loyal Counsellor. She lay on her back, still holding her shield and mace limply, like a warrior but in great distress. She moaned in her great pain. There was no point in telling her all would be well, for she knew she was dying and I knew it likewise. Her helmet, once smooth and stoutly protective, had been beaten in. I had despatched her to where the blows had been thickest because of her quality, and now I grieved. Yet I knew I would do it again. It pained me to see the blood oozing thickly from her helmet.

"How now, Calindra?" I muttered in superfluous fashion, since I knew not what else to say.

Her gasp was tortured. "Great Queen, I am slain. The day is ours?". I assured her it was. "The bitch is dead?".

"She lacks her head, Calindra".

"My agony is great, yet I grieve not if victory is ours. Rather do I claim at your hands Queenly Grace".

I crushed a sob savagely. I knew well what she meant. It is a tradition with us, going back to the mists of unrecorded time, that a noble maid may claim at the hands of her Queen the grace of extinction if her agony is insupportable.

"You wish termination, Calindra?".

"Even so, Majesty. By the royal axe. Send me to mine sweet Charmion. Word was brought to me that she had fallen gallantly, as I had bred her up".

"She fell in battle with Europyle most gallantly".

"Then she died as did our ancestors". She gasped in pain and was silent for a space. Then she came back stronger. I knew it was the harbinger of death. "She issued from my belly, Great Queen, she and her sister, and a day has not passed but I have been proud of them. So my will is that in death our ashes should be mixed in one urn".

I swallowed hard. "It shall be as you say".

Against her will she cried aloud in agony and I pitied her. I took mine axe in mine hand, hating the queenship that forced this duty on me.

"Yet stay" she gasped weakly now. "Tell me that my brave Iras lives". I turned mine head, blinded somewhat by tears. Iras was indeed down, like so many brave maids, yet supporting herself by her left arm, though drooping and hurt. I knew she would survive. I turned back.

"She lives, brave Calindra. Wounded she is, but she will live long".

"'Tis well. For my sake take the maid to your favour, Olympias. For though young, she is worthy".

I knew it; Iras had seventeen summers, as had Charmion, for both had issued from their mother's body on the same day.

"From this moment, she has her mother's seat in Council, with all perquisites and emoluments thereto appertaining".

"Your goodness.....". Her voice broke. "May Inanna bless your Majesty all your days".

Gravely I replied: "'Tis mine hope and I thank you, gallant warrior".

"Therefore strike without grief, my Queen. My sweet Charmion nestles in Inanna's bosom and I would join her in Paradise, where there is no pain".

So I struck and Calindra died without fuss like an Amazon warrior.

Nerissa had held her peace but now she whispered: "I pray that when I fall in battle, death comes with the blow".

"That has been the prayer of warrior maids since Inanna first breathed life into our race. Yet be comforted, my brave one. If it is necessary, you will die as bravely as Calindra".

"But to be stripped of mine honourable equipage by plebeian hands....." she shivered.

"Child, when your spirit is with the great Inanna, what matters it?". She fell silent.

Calindra was not the only one who begged termination of me that day, and because I was Queen I could not refuse their piteous cries, and thus released brave spirits from their mortal shell. Not only noble maids either, but I extended the Royal Grace, as it is called, to silver armoured maids, those of the common run as we say, who were much stricken, thus sparing them much suffering. Daughters called on mothers, mothers on daughters, and often they lay dead beside them and they knew not. This condescension on my part was much applauded. In truth, I took them all to mine bosom, for they were all mine children and in mine eyes their courage had rendered them noble indeed, whether they technically were or no.

And all the while the nursing order removed those yet living, but there were so many that a lot were left, Iras among them. Nerissa and I went to her. I told her to loose her hand from her shield and mace, and we lifted her. I gently told her of her mother's death and she wept. "The noble Calindra slain? And the beautiful Charmion too. Alas, thus am I alone. Of what avail is life?". As well as I could I soothed her, asking of her hurts. "My head.....my shoulder" she whispered. I could see why this should be so, and they told me later that the shoulder was

broken. "And all this coil about being alone. Are you not the Queen's warrior? And are you not from this day on the Queen's daughter?". She sobbed and wanted to cling to me but our armour and her hurts prevented it. I handed her over to the White Amazons with the ringing declaration. "Use this noble maid, who is a Royal Counsellor, and from this day the Daughter of the Palace, with great honour and gentleness, and restore her to me whole in due time. Mark me, now".

When she had been helped away, I discovered that Nerissa, she who counterfeited her real nature with cruel and sardonic speech, was sniffing. "'Twas a sweet, generous act, worthy of a great Queen!".

I told her she was being foolish; and pointed to where mine loyal, if vengeful subjects were stripping the bodies of the dead enemy, ay, down to the very skin, and then dragging them away to throw from the walls. It was like a plague of locusts attacking a grain field. Not noble maids, I thanked Inanna, for they held aloof. Even Nerissa was sickened by the spectacle.

"It is mine order, Nerissa. I could not stop it, even if I wanted to. And I do not want to". Sternly I reminded her: "Had the day gone against us, Mompasia would be doing this to us".

Thus am I called Olympias the Cruel; but likewise Olympias the Just. And sometimes Olympias the Compassionate for my judgements in days of peace. Yet in war I destroy because I must. It has always been our way. We know none other.

Then comes a White Amazon to me, her gown more red than white. "Will your Majesty not come to the Palace? In the marble hall lie many noble maids, stricken unto death. It was to no purpose removing them to hospital, for their lives hang by a thread. They cry most piteously to kiss the Queen's hand before darkness falls upon them. Their helmets have been removed but otherwise lay in their harness as warriors should".

I groaned but said: "Lead on, I follow".

On the steps to the Palace we picked our way between golden bodies, prostrate and exhausted; yet seeing me each sought to rise, but I would not permit it. "Rest, my brave friends. You have earned your rest. Likewise your Queen's love and favour".

I heard the groans long before I reached the great pillars that fronted mine Palace. "I warn your Majesty" said the guide, "to prepare yourself. The wounds you will see are horrible".

I was prepared to see horrors, yet not prepared. Mompasia's ball maces had wreaked terrible damage. I felt the colour drain from my face, and, being human, wished I had bungled her decapitation. I handed mine gauntlets to Nerissa, and knelt by each of them in succession. Bloody lips kissed mine hand and inside my casque tears streamed down mine face. These were maids of the highest caste, mine equal in blood, who had given everything they had for their Queen. The poor wretches tried to stifle their moans before me, but failed signally. As I felt the pressure of their lips on my hand, I leaned forward and held them, whispering: "May Inanna bless you, brave maid". As I passed from one to another, I found one or two had already fled from me. I closed their eyes for them. The others waited their turn with eagerness, and one of them, a maid named Arduine, even found strength to lift herself to reach mine hand. I supported her with mine arm. "Inanna bless your Majesty, and grant you long days" she whispered. And then, her spirit fled. I closed her eyes and laid her gently down on the marble floor. I stayed with them until they were all sped and closed their eyes individually. Then I squatted on the floor and wept.

The doctor approached and touched mine shoulder. "'Twas well done, my Queen" she murmured, much moved, for she too was noble. "Will your Majesty not rest? Allow me to unhelm you".

"Nay, good doctor, you have work to do, more important than unhelming your Queen. The Lady Nerissa can do that office. Call her".

Nerissa had followed me up the steps, still bearing mine shield and mace, much honoured to attend me. She had melted into the shadows and from these she emerged on hearing her name called.

"In truth, your Majesty should rest. This day's work has been fierce. Will you not take sustenance, and some wine?"

Of a sudden I became docile, for I was in very truth wearied. Mine muscles ached from the fight with Morpasia. I allowed mine new comrade to lead me to the royal apartments; she set me down and unlocked mine helmet. Seeing mine face, she gave a little cry, then called out for water to be brought. Then she bethought her.

"But your body servants lie dead. I will seek the water myself". She went and presently came back with water in a silver bowl and a cloth. Did I say Nerissa was a babbler? I love to hear it now. We are comrades-in-arms these several years. She cannot help the babbling; it is how the young maid is. When she slew Europyle she was twenty, young enough for such a fine deed. "My Queen, your face is much bloodied and bruised. Yet I wonder not at it. 'Tis the face of a warrior. And you have fought a battle such as I have not seen. That Morpasia! I thought your Majesty was lost for sure. I was down, much dazed, yet I saw it, as I struggled to rise. Such blows to your helm! Yet you slew the bitch. That I should have seen it! It passes belief how wicked she was, that Morpasia; for look you now, she was of your blood, yet sought your life most greedily. I marvel at such wickedness. In truth I do".

I winced at her ministrations. "And what of your own head, Nerissa".

She laughed hoarsely, dismissively. "'Tis nothing, my Queen. A bruise or two, some blood belike; for I took a good blow from the Lady Europyle as your Majesty will mind. I was also stunned by Morpasia's cursed mace, and that but briefly. I lived to glory in your battle".

"Yet you were mighty gallant, Nerissa, so to thrust yourself between myself and Morpasia".

"Am I not noble?" she asked. "There were others I think. The dear Lady Corinna! I do so regret her, a brave warrior, but no match for Morpasia's mace it seems. Corinna was rich and that armour she wore quite splendid. In ordinary circumstances she could have fought to the day's end without scathe. Yet she dropped and, as I judge, died instantly, for she fell inert, doubtless her skull smashed. For Morpasia was fierce as your Majesty knows well. Yet will not your Majesty take soothing wine and partake of this fruit?"

I smiled. "Ay, if you will let Olympias unhelm you likewise; then eat and drink your fill. For we must return to the Forum shortly. And, ay, you speak truth. In a normal fight our armour is complete protection, as our armourers claim. Yet nothing could sustain those iron balls. Morpasia unleashed total war on us. Our ridged and spiked maces were no match for that weapon. Thus, do many lie dead who might be walking and proudly displaying their bruises to their comrades".

Nerissa laughed, then sighed: "Ay, so many slain, dear friends most of them. Yet being slain.....".

I was beginning to know Nerissa. "You would have Corinna's armour when she is stripped?"

Her eyes gleamed, and she had the grace to blush. It was not greed. To us a fine harness means much. "Why, of a surety she needs it not now. And 'tis a thing of beauty. We are of a size and 'twould need no amendment. You granted me Charmion's harness; yet Charmion, it seems to me, has a sister who lives. Whereas Corinna's daughter fell likewise and needs not her mother's harness. Whereas I.....".

"Could not afford such a rich harness. Is not that what you would say?"

"Something like it, truly, my Queen".

"Then shall you have it; and you may call me Olympias". She bowed. "For you say true. Iras lives. Her sister's harness belongs to her by right. Otherwise, when she is whole again, you would have to fight for it and one of you would fall. And I will have no private quarrels over such a matter. 'Twould be folly". She thanked me profusely. "And" I smiled, speaking slowly, "it is most meet that you should have Corinna's rich armour, for inasmuch as there is not any survivor from Europyle's family - for it must be that her mother and sister lay in their blood in the Forum - I am determined in mine mind to advance you and your family to high nobility, to supply this gap".

The maid went scarlet with joy and sank to her knees, covering mine hands with kisses. "Dearest Queen.....Olympias....." she sobbed, "claim my life at any time".

"Your life is indeed at the disposal of your Queen. So you will acknowledge in your oath of fealty. Yet do you interrupt me. You also have Europyle's place in the Royal Council". And when she would have further thanked me, I mused: "But for sure I heard you have a sister and a mother?"

"Indeed, Olympias. Yet my mother was too old to take the field, and my sister too young, for she is but fourteen". She smiled. "She has her own armour and greatly wished to stand with me this day but I would not permit, for her years are not sufficient".

"You were quite right, Nerissa. You must bring her to Court, when all is settled, and I will honour her for your sake".

We were thus engaged when a maid in silver armour presented herself, saluting with clenched fist to heart. "Your Majesty's presence is desired in the Forum. The yellow plumes have been disposed of. We would know your desire with the noble maids who yet lay in their blood".

I reached for mine helmet which Nerissa locked. There was no good reason to wear it now but I knew well my people would wish to see their warrior Queen in her battered casque as proof of her valour. And when Nerissa was similarly equipped we rose stiffly.

"Lead on maid. We follow".

In the great entrance hall, we stepped over the dead bodies which had not yet been removed. "Faith!" Nerissa muttered, "these poor wretches had best be removed with despatch, lest we nose them as we climb the steps on our return".

"Remember, by my will, you are now of their caste, Nerissa" I reproved her gently, "but you say true. With their bellies yielding up its contents, the air will soon be corrupt".

Now the enemy had been disposed of, and the living removed to gentle care, the Forum looked even more terrible than before. It tore at my heart to see the golden bodies, those who had been so vigorous and full of laughter in mine Court, now so silent. Forgive me, but they were friends. Nor was it only that. There was the blood. It was everywhere, on the flagstones, in rivulets where the stones joined, even splashed on the columns of buildings fronting the Forum. Lampeto still lay where she had fallen. Below her lay Morpasia's trunk, legs twisted under her. Europyle lay midway in the Forum, where she had succumbed to Nerissa's mace. At the far end, where the access to the tunnels were, lay two more golden bodies. It was Europyle's mother and sister. I stirred them gently with mine foot.

I turned to the maid. "Does anyone know how they died?"

"Ay, Majesty, that do I" she replied unemotionally. "I was there. I saw it" she explained. "They bravely attacked Morpasia. It lasted not long. The younger of them twain fell to Morpasia. The mother was cut down by the traitor Europyle".

I was appalled. "You say the bitch Europyle slew her mother?".

"Even so. The mother called out that she had dishonoured their family, whereat Europyle cursed her for a mongrel lover and smashed her to the ground. And as she fell she struck her twice more, as if in passion. That much I can swear to, even though I was mighty busy".

I was chilled. "Maid, come to me later at mine Palace and I will see you rewarded for this intelligence". She bowed. "In the meantime, see them not molested, for they were loyal to Themis".

It was then that Nerissa pointed out to me another maid who seemed anxious to speak to me. "Well, maid?".

She saluted. "Beneath a pile of enemy dead we found a noble maid. She groaned, by which token it seemed that she lived. Thus we delivered her to the nursing sisters and they carried her hence. She bore a rose on her shield, likewise two horizontal bars on her helmet".

Nerissa gasped her delight. "'Twas the Lady Lucilla. Your lady-in-waiting. She who fell first to Europyle as we did witness".

I mentally thanked Inanna that one of mine household, and my body servants, lived. "Ay, it will be Lucilla right enough. May Inanna speed her back to health. And you, maid" I said again, much moved, "I will see you rewarded for your care of mine lady. Your Queen is grateful". She bowed.

I looked around me. The Forum was covered with discarded armour - helmets with yellow plumes, body armour, maces, axes. I ordered it all to be gathered up and taken to the city armoury where it would help equip maids of the common run who could not afford harness.

I ordered carts to be brought and the dead nobles removed. On the way down the Forum we came across the bodies of the twelve maids I had sent to break up Morpasia's wedge. It burned mine eyes to look upon them. Some lay on their backs, some on their faces, one on her side. We stepped over them with care.

Then we stared down at Europyle. Even now her blood was congealed along the split in her helmet Nerissa had made. I had no pity for such a one. Nerissa says I was bleak when I ordered: "Strip her!". As the emblems of her caste were removed I felt satisfaction; and when her padded suit of leather was torn from her, I felt even more so, for one maid is much like another when naked. Nerissa thought that I should have her suspended from a peristyle so that the people could revile her. The thought did not commend itself. Traitor she was, but she was still a noble. One does not do that to a noble maid. Pity was beginning to rise in me, even for a traitor who had plotted mine death. Then one maid looked up at me. "We should have her head, Majesty. Treason must not go unpunished".

"No more it should" Nerissa opined.

So I drew mine axe and severed the head. I had grown sick of blood but my people had not. "Impale her head on a spear, like the other" I ordered, "so that the people can revile the traitor. And throw her body from the walls so that the monsters may feast off her". There was a murmur of approval.

"And Morpasia?" Nerissa prompted.

"No reason why she should have gentler treatment. Strip her likewise. Yet take her armour to the palace, where all maids may see it and be warned". Then the naked trunk was dragged to the wall. I was asked to push her over, and I did so. She fell close to the cliff wall and, striking a jutting rock, was launched outward far beyond the range of our light.

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Nerissa chuckled and behind me I heard a maid laugh, saying: "It warms my heart to think that bitch will end up in a monster's gut".

I stared out beyond the wall to where I could hear, far away, squeals and grunts, rendered more strange by the darkness. I looked down at the valley floor below the crags upon which our city is built. I felt, as so often before, the security granted by three hundred feet of sheer rock face. The white bodies of our dead enemies looked small now, like a child's doll. I shrugged; I had not asked them to attack Themis. Nerissa laughed: "It sounds as if the monsters make merry tonight".

"As well they may, good mine comrade. Never before have they had such largesse from the city. For never before have we had civil war forced on us".

We returned to the Forum now. There were the carts, propelled by plebeians, for we have no horses. The loss of our mounts is a traditional grief to we Amazons, for when we had gone underground all those centuries before, horses were denied us. So members of the servant class were used to pull the carts. We stood, Nerissa and I, watching them throw the golden bodies up into the carts. I heard the armoured bodies clash against each other. I started to rumble wrathfully, as it hurt mine eyes to see our noble caste so handled. It was good that Nerissa was there to soothe me. "Nay, good Olympias, bethink you now. They have to swing them so. They are heavy in their armour, and the plebeians are but maids like we, although far below us, being only servants. And our noble warriors can feel nothing of such usage". I blessed the young maid and her good commonsense. So I remonstrated not with them.

We watched Lampeto dragged from the steps and thrown into the cart. Then Europyle's family. Then Paula and her daughter, Autonoe. And those twelve maids I had had to sacrifice. "Autonoe was but nineteen" I said quietly. "A promising maid, in truth. I will raise a memorial to all who fell this day". There were many others and the carts took their grisly loads to the House of the Dead (what you call the mortuary) many times. Yet when it came to Corinna, Nerissa would not permit her tossed into a cart with others. "Bring me an empty cart" she ordered. I smiled to myself within my casque's friendly anonymity. And when the cart had come she asked my permission to go with it. Corinna was, I noted, used more tenderly than anyone; and Nerissa looked to her stripping herself. Within the hour she was, somewhat shamefacedly to be sure, parading before me in that splendid chased harness. And truly it fitted her well. I inspected the helmet and saw the dent where Morpasia's mace had struck so fiercely. I needed no one to tell me what had happened. "The armourers can hammer out that dent" I remarked. "You should look mighty splendid, Nerissa". Nerissa beamed with happiness: "So I think".

We sat and drank wine together, like two warriors should after a battle, grateful for life. "That House of the Dead is no good place to be" quoth she. "Families were there to claim the bodies of their slain. Those were used reverently. Yet for those who were not claimed, the usage was rough".

I smiled. "You must remember, noble Nerissa, that our deaths mean nothing to plebeians. Moreover, to them it is an old story, boring by repetition. And I doubt not that they are overworked".

"Ay, truly, there were many dead. Those of the common run lay in heaps awaiting attention. Yet for Corinna I ordered special treatment, as also for Paula, for I know you liked her well, she being your secretary. And 'tis a crime her quill is stilled, for she had a fair hand".

"In truth she had. Her loss is great".

It was at that precise moment that Egeria, the chief surgeon (and by that token she who had special care of the Queen) came to me. "My Queen, when you have laid aside your armour I must examine you for you had a mighty battle and suffered much".

"Pooh!"

"What means your Majesty?"

"That I am well enough".

"Of that your Majesty is no judge. We must make sure. You went through much as I did see with my own eyes. So come you even as I say". Egeria is permitted much freedom with her Queen, for her skill is great.

"Very well, I will attend you".

Later, in sandals and stola, I presented myself and lay on the couch she pointed out. There I suffered a painstaking examination with equipment similar to that invented in your surface by the man Rontgen (we had known of the principle somewhat earlier). Egeria sat herself down by me. "Your Majesty has been fortunate. There is much bruising but otherwise you have suffered no scathe".

"Much bruising say you?". For answer she held a reflective glass before me (for it is not the habit of Amazon maids to carry mirrors, for it seems to us that a dagger is more important) and I saw indeed the yellow blotches that disfigured my face. I must have given a faint smile, for she laughed.

"Ay, the marks of a warrior. A sight to stir the blood and stimulate the pride of any Amazon maid. In my youth....." - she touched her grey hair briefly - "but I talk like a fool. Your Majesty's face will be black anon, for Morpasia's weapon was fearsome".

"I know it, learned one. Yet let us speak of mine sisters".

Her glance wavered and I was immediately affrighted, for I dreaded what she might have to say.

"And the Reyin Drusilla?" I prompted.

"Ah!". She was silent for a spell. "In truth, it might be worse. Yet the Reyin has a crack in her skull, such as they call a fracture. But it can be mended. It is not she who troubles us".

"In truth Egeria, you frighten your Queen!". I gripped her wrist. "You speak of the Reyin Selene?"

"Ay, I do so. I know not how to tell your Majesty, for 'tis a thing most shocking. Yet it appears to us that the Reyin was struck many times, not in battle, but shamefully and most dishonourably, while she lay helpless". I swore, for I could imagine who had done this thing. Had Morpasia not been beyond my vengeance, she would have suffered for it. "Now, hush, dear Queen, for it availeth nothing. I meant merely that the armour of a high noble, such as is Selene, is triple-plated and it is not possible to break into it except by many blows. And there are marks of the axe on the helmet. It was meant to leave Selene dead on the ground".

"Very likely. For the enmities within the royal house are known to all maids. She will die?"

"In truth, we are not sure. Yet. What we could do has been done. The skull is broken and splinters of bone have entered the brain, not far but far enough. We have withdrawn these with care and my subordinates are even now burning away the jagged edges of the bone to make a round hole in the skull. When 'tis done, I, Egeria, will make a plug of bone to fit the hole exactly".

Like any lay person, I stared aghast. "This can be done?"

"Ay, 'tis standard practice and has been since the earliest times. I mind reading a parchment in the Hall of Records wherein an Egyptian surgeon of the time of Hapshetsut detailed this method of treating head wounds. In time the new bone will merge with her own, and the hair will grow and cover the plug. We are troubled about her brain; yet it seems to us

the damage will not be great. We think.....we believe that the most that will happen is a slowing down of reaction which, for a warrior, is not good. It could spell the difference between life and death. And in Council you may see judgements take longer to reach. In truth she will be fortunate if it is only so, for the wound is very grave, even with our superior skills".

"Just as long as she lives".

"We will do our best".

"I know it. So go, Egeria, and do what you may".

"The recovery will not be quick, my Queen. The Reyin Selene will be a-bed a long time".

So I left our wise surgeon and returned to mine chamber where Nerissa even now wore Corinna's magnificent blue and gold harness. I sat and watched her posture, with amusement, yet with sadness too, for Corinna had been mine friend. After the royal house she had been the richest noble in Amazonia, and her equipage gave proof of it. Many envied her that harness, to all of which she had been sublimely indifferent, or disdainful as only a great noble can be. I marvelled greatly that in that harness Morpasia had been able to slay her, for it was strong and splendid. Logically, she should be alive; with that kind of protection she should have been able to fight to the day's end. I said so to Nerissa.

"Ay, 'tis true, Olympias. Yet Corinna whispered to me that she would die this day. The soothsayers had so warned her; and they are rarely wrong".

"And knowing this, she took the field?".

Nerissa looked at me, astonished. "Olympias, she was a gallant maid and a great warrior. She was always pointed out to me as someone to emulate. Take the field? Why, she loved you and was always your loyal friend. And forget not that she and Morpasia had a mutual loathing. Corinna died in your interest happily and 'tis with great pride I wear this, her noble equipage".

After I had stripped her of the trappings of a warrior maid, she serviced me (as all my ladies had been slain) as if she had been a body servant all her days and had not been trained in chancery.

The Battle of Themis, as our scribes call it, was fought on the third day of our month of Thoth, for we have always retained the ancient Egyptian calendar, as opposed to your own Julian calendar. But I have often been astonished at the closeness of our battle with the outbreak of your own conflict which you term World War II, for both took place in your year 1939, within a few days of each other. Although you knew not what was happening miles beneath your feet. Which, considering what was to be visited upon you, is perhaps as well. You had a wicked man called Adolf Hitler; we had a wicked maid called Morpasia.

The term total war is relative. Every age uses it. Certainly we used it in Themis to describe Morpasia's attack, and her tactics, for it was something outside our experience.

The story having been told it was mine purposed to cease here. Yet the Lady Lucilla, who as well as a warrior is a scholar also, tells me (or rather, reminds me of something I had forgotten) of the great curiosity of surface dwellers. Thus will I tell you of what befell Themis, and mine sisters, after the battle, and so complete this history.

That night, exhausted in both mind and body, I retired to the royal chamber and fell onto its bed's silk richness with great thankfulness. I am not callous, but I have a tough mind. A Queen has to be so, and I flushed from mine mind what had happened in the Forum, and its inevitable result. Normality had been restored, even to the guards outside the door. Then, before I slept, Nerissa came to me by mine command and I drew her into bed. I was used to having a bedfellow, such is mine nature. Nerissa came gladly and seductively, with speech of sweet breath composed. And the smoothness of her skin charmed my senses; yet when her strong yet gentle hand hovered like a gossamer butterfly between mine legs, I laughed: "Nay, Nerissa, have pity, not tonight. For your Queen is much wearied, and would sleep". And she, who was likewise much tired, mumbled acquiescence. "There will, in truth, be other nights, Nerissa. For the love of a great warrior for her Queen is a beautiful thing". And so we slept, her head between mine breasts, her glossy dark hair like a swarm of delightful ants on mine skin.

Elsewhere in the city I doubted not that grief and exhaustion produced a sleeping city. My last coherent thought was that if an enemy should come upon us as we were, the city would fall without a blow being struck. Yet I was consoled by the fact that the guards patrolled the walls, as usual. And thus I slept.

Even a warrior suffers from bad dreams it seems; for I had a nightmare of an army of mine warriors facing a mighty force of Cro-magnon men and going down in their blood, laying in heaps; I heard the clash of arms and the piteous cries. Then I awoke on a sudden, all a-sweat. It was quiet, and I lay listening, and was much comforted. There was the sound of Nerissa's regular breathing, the warmth of her body too; and beyond this the sound of the fountains in the Palace gardens, innocently splashing. I thought of the evenings we would spend, laying beside them, in indolent pleasure and making love. And I sank into a more peaceful sleep.

I blinked into wakefulness, much refreshed, to see Nerissa standing nigh with a silver breakfast tray. I blinked again, sleepily, yawning. I regarded her well; her hair was neatly combed, and her eyes wide and luminous. I felt mine privy parts leap with desire, but I controlled myself. She wore a diaphonous robe over her nakedness that merely accentuated her desirability, as she knew well. Her breasts, firm and young, made me hunger for her; for an Amazon maid, the battle over, returns once more to fleshly delights. It is not with us as it is for surface maids; there are no taboos, no guilt, no conventions. We know we are formed to give and receive pleasure and revel in our sensuality. Nerissa's lips twitched, in full knowledge of her Queen's need, and I knew that she too yearned. Strength was back in our limbs, and we were lustful maids again.

"Will your Majesty not partake of breakfast?" she murmured silkily. "The fruit, plucked by these hands, while you yet slept, looks mighty succulent, and the wine gleams most happily in this crystal goblet".

We ate together, and drank together, our eyes devouring each other. I bethought me of surface history, and mine lips twitched. She would be mine 'favourite', mine Pompadour, yet as I thought it I knew the parallel was not exact. Yet the idea was sound; Nerissa would indeed be mine favourite until I lost her, many years later, in a raid. Ay, her body would be mine own especial preserve. "This is very fine, Nerissa" I murmured. "Yet let me kiss the hand that slew Europyle". It was smooth, white, be-ringed but strong. "And I likewise" she whispered, "the hand that took Morpasia's head". I stared, delighted, as she covered mine right hand with passionate kisses.

Then she said: "What is your will with this first day of peace, Olympias, my Queen". We drank to each other, as our custom is. "For it seems to me that while the battle is oer, there is much to do".

She reminded me of mine duty, of the many bodies that remained to be decently disposed of and mine heart sank. "Damn you, Nerissa" said I, without heat, "for reminding me of a Queen's duty. My will is this, that we first bathe" - her cheeks dimpled mischievously, knowing what was in store for her - "then will you bring me mine gold robe, and jewelled dagger, and we will go survey the Forum and I will give orders for its cleansing".

"Ay, 'tis true, the Forum is much bloodied. Our blood and theirs. For as I remarked, as one yellow plume was stripped, any that lived were having their throats cut. Your people are most vengeful".

"And why not? Were they not our enemies?"

"They were so, Majesty. And 'tis good to be alive, and they slain. For life is a wonderful thing, here in Amazonia; our days are never cold, never too hot, manipulated thus by our scientists. Yet have I read of a thing called the sun which surface-dwellers can bask in. You have seen it. Pray tell me of it".

I had forgotten she was a learned maid, and smiled at the eagerness of her thirst for knowledge. "Why, 'tis a round golden orb which, when it is uncovered by cloud, warms both maid and the ground, stimulating the growth of crops and fruit. Yet hanker not for it. For on the surface there are such things as winters, when the sun is low in the sky, and 'tis mighty cold and water becomes solid and rain falls as a white powder called snow, which covers the land to a great depth, and is chilling. To move is difficult outside of one's dwelling. Yet here we have no such inconveniences. As you say, our learned ones have so ordered it that our heat source provides a constant temperature. Believe me, Nerissa, 'tis much to be preferred. And I would not have your cheek exposed to the bitter winds of the surface. But come, let us bathe".

We plunged naked into my private bath and there, in the mild anonymity of the water we clung together, legs entwined, grappling in purest joy. And suddenly Nerissa cried out and went limp, eyes glazed, lips slack. "Faith, Nerissa" I laughed triumphantly, "no warrior could wrest that cry from you with a mace". She moaned, and mine lips burned down on hers, hungrily, whilst our breasts contended in delicious combat.

Then Nerissa sighed languorously, happily. Then I felt her hands on mine legs and I knew whither she was bound, and awaited her with longing. Then mine whole body jerked, and I cried out, arms threshing the water uncontrollably. Her left arm circled mine neck, holding me to her; her mouth found mine, her tongue insistent and prehensile, and below the water her right hand was mighty active to mine great happiness.

Later, when we floated weakly together, I called her a bitch so to demoralise her Queen, yet I laughed and she with me. "Mayhap" she giggled in mine ear, "had Morpasia approached you so.....".

"Wicked maid!" I cried, holding her at arm's length, and speaking in loving mockery, "thou witch! Know you not that were you not a noble maid, were you a despised plebeian, your head should pay for what you have done to your Queen!"

"I know it well, Olympias. Yet as I am noble.....".

I opened mine arms to her in answer. Later as we lay, debilitated, by the side of the pools, bosoms mighty agitated, I could truly have eaten her soft flesh. Yet I was Queen and had other things to think of. "Go" I said with mock sternness, "dress yourself. And when I am dry I will call you. Bring me then mine golden robe and sandals". Laughing, and secure in knowledge of her power, she went.

And I, returning to mine chamber, sat, yet scarcely knowing what I did, mind in a turmoil. I had a twinge of conscience when I thought of Drusilla and Selene laying wounded and in pain, and I cavorting shamelessly.

The twinge was easily suppressed. I groaned, mine whole body still on fire from Nerissa's attentions. I was not myself, although I had to be. I called, and she came to me, pretty in stola and headress, and bearing the Queenly gown and sandals. She knelt, sliding my feet into the golden sandals without a word. I watched her arranging the straps around mine legs and tying the lacings at the calf. I frowned, wishing I could make her lady-in-waiting. I rejected it as I would never know a moment's peace. In any case, I hoped Lucilla would live to be mine chief lady-in-waiting. She had earned advancement by her courage. Yet I had to have Nerissa by me.

Then I bethought me. Comptroller of the Royal Household! The post was vacant, for its holder, Asteria, was one of the twelve maids I had sent to aid Calindra and Zeta break the wedge, and accordingly lay dead, giving her life for her Queen. I was to give Nerissa many offices, making her, by that token, very rich; but the Comptroller had apartments in the Palace, near the Queen, and that was what I wanted.

She dressed me in mine golden robe; then, before placing the circlet of gold on mine brow, she combed mine hair. I winced once as she touched a bruise; and I heard her chuckle. Charmion had once performed this duty, and when I thought of it, I had a twinge of pain. But Charmion would have smiled, saying: "I understand, Olympias. Yet was our love not sweet?". So I thought of it no more.

Asteria had been mine mother's Comptroller, and, as I had heard, her bedfellow. She had been a worthy maid, and a fine warrior. In a way, I was glad she had fallen, for it opened the road for Nerissa. I would never have deposed her, had she lived, for mine mother's sake, but it was better she was urn-fodder. In retrospect it sounds cruel, yet at the time it seemed natural enough.

When we reached the great marble entrance of the Palace, plebeians were busy cleansing it of the blood and body refuse of the noble maids who had lain there. When they saw me they made deep obeisance; I acknowledged it automatically and called for the chief of them. "When you have finished here, I wish the Forum to be cleansed of all blood. Life must go on. See to it, I charge you". The old maid bowed.

Nerissa smiled: "It must be fine to be Queen!"

I knew what she meant, yet I sighed: "High office implies obligations as well as privilege, as you saw in the Forum. But always speak a plebeian fair, Nerissa, for they are maids likewise. As I think you reminded your Queen not long since. 'Tis not their fault they were born base instead of noble".

"Yet it must be awful to be a plebeian".

"In truth, yet think not of it. They have never known aught else. And they eat and drink well; and are allowed to breed. How else would we fill the ranks of servants and gladiatrices?"

"True".

We went then to the hospital to see how it was with mine sisters. Egeria could tell me little. I was allowed to see Drusilla under her transparent sterile bubble. Part of her head had been shaved, and she was in artificially induced sleep. Her face had large blue blotches, and there was another on her left breast where Morpasia had struck her; but it was lighter here for, for obvious reasons, our armour is strengthened at this point. I realised how fierce had been Morpasia's blow, and mine hands clenched angrily. I stared at the naked body I knew so well and two very unqueenly tears started from mine eyes. "She will live?"

"She will live" I was assured. But I was not allowed to see Selene. "It would distress your Majesty too much. 'Tis not a pretty sight. Even I, Egeria, am saddened when I look on her, for she is a fine maid".

"That is very true. And what of the Lady Lucilla?"

"Pooh! That is mere nothing. She took, indeed, a sharp blow from Euro-pyle which stunned her, and she fell. There was some blood but not much for her armour was strong. Then other bodies covered her, and she came close to death by suffocation. But she will be well".

I was mighty relieved. "Send her back to me when possible. And I will send a servant for her harness".

"Ay, and I shall be mighty glad to see the back of her, my Queen, for she is a bad patient, grumbling that it is all a load of nonsense, that she is a warrior and to lie a-bed after a tap such as she has taken many a time on a raid is a crime, and such-like trifles with which I will not bore your Majesty".

I laughed. "Ay, that sounds like Lucilla indeed". The maid's hardihood pleased me much.

So Nerissa and I passed on, climbing the steps to the Stone of Farewell. The hillside above the city was the scene of much sad activity. I called the Chief Mortician (as you would doubtless call her) to me. She had as much emotion about her as water in a desert. "Your Majesty is welcome" says she, bowing low, "you add royal honour to our proceedings".

"Leave that. Give me a report".

"These are family cremations. As is customary. Your Majesty's decision on the disposal of the enemy was well thought on, for we have much ado to handle the loyal maids". I nodded, looking about me. I saw groups bearing bodies and urns, dressed in black as the universal custom seems to be. The bodies they bore were white and pitiable; they had been cleansed of blood indeed but this made them all the more sad. One by one they were laid on the great slab of black marble. Prayers were said by a priestess. The Chief Mortician raised a mechanical hand, there was a flash of blue light and within seconds the body was consumed and only a pile of ashes remained. Then two assistants came forward, one bearing a silver shovel, the other a brush, and the urn was filled. The sight sobered me, I confess; in the distant future I too would be so consumed, naturally with greater ceremony. I turned to the emotionless one.

"I would ask of certain noble maids.....as Calindra, Zeta, Paula, Asteria, Corinna, Charmion, Myrine.....".

"These are the great ones of Themis. Your Majesty's interest was foreseen and all noble maids lie packed in ice awaiting instructions".

I was much relieved. "So! 'Tis well done. Calindra wished her daughter Charmion's ashes to be mixed with hers. Corinna has a daughter but of such tender years that she cannot attend to this. Myrine's mother fell likewise, as I am told. Zeta's mother lives. In all cases of the noble families without survivors, the Palace will make itself responsible. See then that on the morrow they are brought hither at this hour, when I will attend. I owe them this last honour. They were especial friends".

The Mortician bowed. "It shall be done according to your Majesty's command. Does the instruction apply equally to the traitor Euro-pyle's family? For mother and daughter lie, bearing many honourable wounds, piteously slain by the traitor".

"Even so. They are noble and fought for me. Ay, and died for me likewise, as you say. I make no distinction with other noble maids".

And so it was. On the day following I came at the same hour with many guards, and with the remnants of the royal Council; and truly it hurt mine eyes to see how few there were. Some came bandaged, and some were supported by others. But they came, to say farewell to friends and many were the groans as body after body was consumed. And I confess to you, that when Calindra and Charmion were consumed, I averted mine eyes. And Corinna likewise, for she had been much mine friend, always.

Under mine robes I felt cold as I watched the bodies being consumed, yet the air was temperate as usual. I felt relief in cursing Morpasia in mine mind, for had it not been for her wickedness and ambition, maids who now lay in urns would be walking abroad in the flesh, happily laughing, making love and going about their business. I wish I could say, in perfect truth, that the first days of mine Queenship were a joy. But I can not. I had duties I could in no way evade; and there was no Selene or Drusilla to lean on. And the Royal Council had been so decimated, that I was effectively alone, with only Nerissa to comfort me.

If the sight of mine noble friends being rendered into ash had saddened me, the mass cremation of the ordinary maids was a horror I would not care to repeat. For after the private ceremonies, there remained a hard core of cases for whom there was no person to take responsibility - perhaps there was no family, or if there was perhaps they could not afford private obsequies. Families empty their purses to purchase the finest armour for their daughters, and then, if death comes hard on the heels of this expenditure, they are in no state to cope with the additional cost. This was well understood by everyone; and so the Queen made herself responsible.

Yet the sight of the stacked bodies, a veritable forest of arms and legs, was piteous indeed. There were so many indeed that they had to be destroyed by the power staffs. After placement in a large urn, they were taken in procession to the Temple and placed in the crypt. To be honest, I was glad when it was all done.

Grief? As you know grief, there is little among us. I have never seen the indiscipline, the tearing of the hair that I understand goes on still in the surface world. It is not in our nature; I like to think we are more intelligent. Or perhaps it is because our society is so different. We do not look upon death as the end, but rather as a beginning, the release of the spirit (or soul) from the body to rejoin the great spiritual body from which it came. Thus, there is little grief by mothers when a daughter falls in battle, nor from daughters when a mother drops - except for the private sense of loss that one maid feels for another. Grief is replaced by pride for a warrior who has done her duty. There is a dignity about this that no surface dweller can appreciate. And yet it is natural enough to us, for we regard death in combat as a desirable end, since it spares us the sadness of decline.

Thus, one day not long after this I was alone in mine cabinet working, when the Lady Calvina was announced. I was astonished; yet after thought not astonished, for this maid, though old, was tough. I knew she had had her shoulder broken by Morpasia's vicious blow, and I saw she was bound up, and should have been in her villa and not waiting on me. I stared at her bruised face and she at mine, appreciatively. I bade her sit.

"A famous victory, my Queen".

"'Twas close enough" I reminded her.

Her wrinkled face cracked in a smile. "I doubted not that we should triumph".

"Yet at what cost, Calvina".

"A great cost, truly".

"Ay, and I do greatly regret Corinna".

"She had served loyally for many years. A great loss to us all".

"Ay, and she dropped in front of me".

"As was her duty".

"And yet.....".

"My Queen, she was a warrior maid and wanted no more than to die for you. And would it please you now to consider my proposals for replacement?"

So this was the crunch, mine moment of truth. I had been well grounded in statecraft by mine mother and knew well enough the pitfalls and the intrigues of Court life, whether on the surface or in subterranea. I knew too well that there were some noble maids - not many, but some - who would like to make the Queen plough their own swathe; which is to say, make the Queen merely a cipher. I was determined to allow no diminution of mine rights as Queen. I knew too that I would have to grasp this particular nettle, and that soon. Yet, with apparent docility, I said I would consider her list. Now she, thinking she had gained ascendancy over the young Queen, adroitly changed her ground.

"May I enquire as to the condition of your valiant sisters?"

"Not good, Calvina. Yet the surgeons assure me they will live. This pleases me greatly".

"They are strong young maids with a lust for life. And valiant indeed. For I did see the Reyin Drusilla fight Morpasia, and marvelled greatly, for it was a desperate battle. A maid of great gallantry. Amazonia is greatly favoured in its royal house".

I inclined my head graciously. "Except in regard to Morpasia".

Hastily she acknowledged the fact. I knew that after this feint, she was preparing to attack; one could see it in her eyes. In her brusque, business-like way she pounced: "There remains then but replacements for the noble maids who lie dead, or rather rest in their urns. Also, certain of our families were destroyed entirely. It will be necessary to ennoble.....".

I responded firmly: "I have your list, Calvina, and I have said I will consider your nominations. Let the matter rest there. As to ennoblement, by tradition this is solely in the gift of the Queen".

"Yet, my Queen.....".

I was conscious of the grit in mine voice, when I replied: "Some of the maids who fought for me so bravely may yet yield up their spirit to Inanna. Until we know for certain who will live and who will die nothing can be done".

"Should your Majesty seek any advice on this matter" she suggested, doggedly, "I shall be happy.....".

I was angry and spoke coldly: "Lady Calvina, this is a matter upon which the Crown is fully competent to make a judgement".

She nodded her head submissively, yet her eyes were anything but submissive. I told her she had mine permission to withdraw, which she did backwards, as the custom is. I hated to treat her thus, and she in her white hairs. Yet I was Queen and mine prerogatives dear to me.

At our evening meal, I told Nerissa of it. She smiled faintly, and not without contempt. "Ay, she would act thus. One of the old school. And you did right to outface her. 'Tis a thousand pities she was not slain, rather than Corinna. No matter, Olympias. When your sisters are back at your side, all will be well".

I kissed her, and she me. Then she perused the list Calvina had presented. "Ay, quite fair. Melissa now, Corinna's young sister. A maid with good judgement, devoted to the royal house. She fought in the battle and was wounded. She will bear her scar proudly! A maid hungry for honour. I like Melissa. Lydia too, a valiant maid and most sound in your interest. We must have no more Europyle's". Her mouth hardened and her eyes became chips of stone. "It does my heart good to know I settled her account for her. She was a bitch!".

"That she was".

She leaned back in her chair, staring into her goblet, half-smiling:

"It seems to me, dearest Queen, that there are so many appointments to be made, so many vacancies to be filled, that it would be most meet if you disposed of this so troublesome Counsellor".

"Nay, but Nerissa.....". I was aghast.

She laughed until the tears ran. "Nay, Olympias, I meant not that. I had no thought of the dungeon, or that you should take her head. Rather that you should send her away from Themis for a time, say a year. The Satellite City lacks a Governor and must be in a state of chaos. Why not send her there for a time to restore order? For disorder there must be, it being a penal colony. How say you?"

The more I thought on it, the more it attracted. I smiled. It would certainly reduce mine problems to have Calvina in exile, for I could then make the appointments I wished without interference. And it would make others of her way of thinking walk warily before me. I conveniently forgot her service to mine mother, and agreed. I knew I was being harsh, cruel even, yet it was but for a year. "You say true, Nerissa" I smiled, "and as Head of Chancery you have a fair hand of writ. Write me the Order, and couch it in such terms as to make it an honour, rather than a punishment; for she has stood near the throne all her days".

And so it was. The audience between Calvina and mineself was difficult to say the least. I could see her hurt. She knew she had overplayed her hand. It was as if I had taken an axe to her, or thrust mine dagger between her ribs. I saw shock, horror, anger on her face; then her visage became as a mask, taking refuge in pride. She would not let me see her pain, nor would she beg. I both pitied her, and admired such stoicism, but knew I had to be inflexible. And was. She said little, but took the Order and withdrew, bowing low. In six months I recalled her, out of pity, but on her return she resigned her seat on the Council, took no further part in public life, retiring to her villa, where she died five years since. The entire Court followed her urn to the Temple. My new Council was younger and there was no place in it for old bones, and she knew it. They say she died of a broken heart. Such a condition is unknown to medical science, so I know not. Yet I honoured her much, and was gracious to her. She was invited to every state and city function, yet came not. I am told she grieved. I even offered her a sinecure post at Court, which she declined. It was, in truth, a young Court and a frivolous, much given over to music, love and laughter. She would indeed have been out of place. I hope it was that, and not something more sinister. But enough of Calvina. At that time I had other things to think of, like mine wounded sisters.

It was mine custom to visit Drusilla and Selene every day. As for Selene, I daily expected to hear of her death, yet she clung to life tenaciously. Drusilla was a totally different case. One day I found her sitting up in bed, sipping a glass of wine. It astonished me, for their wounds had been grave, and both had been operated on.

Drusilla regarded me with much love. "Olympias, dear sister, I think I owe you my life".

"And you mine crown".

"Pish!". I saw her colour with pleasure at mine words. "It was my great pleasure, for as you know, there were old scores to settle. It angers me to think that she cut me down, yet I am pleased to know that her head even now decorates the Forum. And I thank you again for my life".

I shrugged. "Think not of it, Drusilla. It was merely the act of a sister. And are we not lovers? It was nothing".

"I think you lie, Olympias. There are those who would have let me die".

"How could I let you die when the skill of our surgeons could save you?"

"Yet, had you gone down to Morpasia, she would have let us die".

So this was the crunch, mine moment of truth. I had been well grounded in statecraft by mine mother and knew well enough the pitfalls and the intrigues of Court life, whether on the surface or in subterranea. I knew too well that there were some noble maids - not many, but some - who would like to make the Queen plough their own swathe; which is to say, make the Queen merely a cipher. I was determined to allow no diminution of mine rights as Queen. I knew too that I would have to grasp this particular nettle, and that soon. Yet, with apparent docility, I said I would consider her list. Now she, thinking she had gained ascendancy over the young Queen, adroitly changed her ground.

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She laughed until the tears ran. "Nay, Olympias, I meant not that. I had no thought of the dungeon, or that you should take her head. Rather that you should send her away from Themis for a time, say a year. The Satellite City lacks a Governor and must be in a state of chaos. Why not send her there for a time to restore order? For disorder there must be, it being a penal colony. How say you?"

The more I thought on it, the more it attracted. I smiled. It would certainly reduce mine problems to have Calvina in exile, for I could then make the appointments I wished without interference. And it would make others of her way of thinking walk warily before me. I conveniently forgot her service to mine mother, and agreed. I knew I was being harsh, cruel even, yet it was but for a year. "You say true, Nerissa" I smiled, "and as Head of Chancery you have a fair hand of writ. Write me the Order, and couch it in such terms as to make it an honour, rather than a punishment; for she has stood near the throne all her days".

And so it was. The audience between Calvina and myself was difficult to say the least. I could see her hurt. She knew she had overplayed her hand. It was as if I had taken an axe to her, or thrust mine dagger between her ribs. I saw shock, horror, anger on her face; then her visage became as a mask, taking refuge in pride. She would not let me see her pain, nor would she beg. I both pitied her, and admired such stoicism, but knew I had to be inflexible. And was. She said little, but took the Order and withdrew, bowing low. In six months I recalled her, out of pity, but on her return she resigned her seat on the Council, took no further part in public life, retiring to her villa, where she died five years since. The entire Court followed her urn to the Temple. My new Council was younger and there was no place in it for old bones, and she knew it. They say she died of a broken heart. Such a condition is unknown to medical science, so I know not. Yet I honoured her much, and was gracious to her. She was invited to every state and city function, yet came not. I am told she grieved. I even offered her a sinecure post at Court, which she declined. It was, in truth, a young Court and a frivolous, much given over to music, love and laughter. She would indeed have been out of place. I hope it was that, and not something more sinister. But enough of Calvina. At that time I had other things to think of, like mine wounded sisters.

It was mine custom to visit Drusilla and Selene every day. As for Selene, I daily expected to hear of her death, yet she clung to life tenaciously. Drusilla was a totally different case. One day I found her sitting up in bed, sipping a glass of wine. It astonished me, for their wounds had been grave, and both had been operated on.

Drusilla regarded me with much love. "Olympias, dear sister, I think I owe you my life".

"And you mine crown".

"Pish!". I saw her colour with pleasure at mine words. "It was my great pleasure, for as you know, there were old scores to settle. It angers me to think that she cut me down, yet I am pleased to know that her head even now decorates the Forum. And I thank you again for my life".

I shrugged. "Think not of it, Drusilla. It was merely the act of a sister. And are we not lovers? It was nothing".

"I think you lie, Olympias. There are those who would have let me die".

"How could I let you die when the skill of our surgeons could save you?"

"Yet, had you gone down to Morpasia, she would have let us die".

"Morpasia was a bitch!".

She smiled faintly. "That surface-world insult of a maid for another covers many occasions, does it not, dear Queen?".

"Some, truly" I laughed.

"Yet I minded not dying in battle. None of our race does. When Morpasia struck me with that cursed mace, I knew myself to be finished and cared not. As I sank, blackness gathering around me, I was content to have died in your interest".

"I know it well, Drusilla. You are a gallant maid and a great warrior". Again she blushed her pleasure. "They tell me you had a hard time with Morpasia?".

"Hard enough".

"So I give you back the compliment, Olympias. You are a worthy Queen". We looked upon each other with much love. Then she said: "I yearn for the day when we shall lie together again and make perfect love".

"I too".

"Yet they say you have a surrogate".

"Nerissa? Ay, she comes to me in bed. You know how it is with me, my Drusilla. 'Tis lonely being a Queen; I know how it must have been for our lady mother".

"Truly, yet she had Asteria. And others".

"'Tis well that Amazon maids are not jealous! And a Queen can take lovers where she will, each noble maid considering it an honour to be so chosen".

"As indeed they should, for the Crown is the fount of all honour. But they tell me that Nerissa slew Europyle".

"Indeed she did, and most comprehensively. And thus is she worthy of favour".

"Indeed so.....yet I forget another worthy maid, our sister Selene. They say her wound was the gravest of all".

"Speak not of it, Drusilla. For in truth my gorge rises whenever I think on what Morpasia did to her. I have inspected her bascinet and I shudder to look on't. For while it is one's duty to terminate a fallen enemy as a matter of course, this was but savagery unseemly in a warrior".

"As I have heard from Egeria". She reached out and took mine hand. "I love her likewise, Olympias and I have prayed unceasingly to Inanna that she might live. And even this day Egeria tells me that she improves somewhat".

This intelligence sent me post-haste to my Chief Surgeon who endorsed Drusilla's words; yet denied me entrance to Selene, saying that she was not well enough to be seen. And indeed it was another three months before I sat by her bed, holding her hand, and looking at her heavily bandaged head with concern. Her lips twitched. "Worry not, Olympias. I am quite indestructible!".

"Such talk misfortunes a maid, Selene. Say not so".

"Well, well, let it be as you say. I know well I nearly died. Egeria is most definite on the matter".

"As well she might be, Selene. Yet you mend now. I miss your counsel greatly, your wisdom. So haste you back to us".

Her eyes locked with mine. "I am still a Counsellor?".

"Who else but you, sister?".

"Yet the surgeons do tell me that I shall never be the maid I was".

As gently as I could I said: "Beloved, no maid can take such a terrible wound and remain untouched by it".

"Ay. Egeria says 'tis in the speedy making of decisions that I shall be deficient. It occurred to me that you might wish to replace me in the Council".

"Never".

She seemed relieved and I saw, quite untypical for one of our race, two tears start from the corner of her eyes, and I held her close. "You see how weak I am, Olympias. To hear your goodness moves me greatly. Our mother smiles on you from Heaven".

I bowed my head. "'Tis so to be hoped, sister". Now I could see that she was troubled by something else, a phantasm which she could not dispel. So I pressed her: "Tell me what really troubles you".

She laughed ruefully. "Ay, you know me well, Olympias. At a pinch, I could do without the Council, though it would distress me greatly. But if I am to be slow in judgement, why then.....".

I knew whither she was bound and hugged her the tighter. Yet I marvelled that with her famous clarity of vision she had not come to terms with the obvious.

"Ay, Selene?".

"From my earliest years I was noted for a scholar; thus did my school-fellows jeer at me, for we know how cruel children can be to each other. So I bloodied a few noses, causing my detractors to lay down in a stupor; after this they kept silence. Yet I had to work hard to be recognised as a warrior, which among us is a great matter. And I was so recognised. Now comes this slowness of judgement upon me. I am troubled lest it affect my sharpness of wits in combat".

I swallowed hard, for Egeria had told me that Selene's fighting days were over. Yet I knew Selene too well to believe that she would accept this judgement. So I said to her: "Selene, I swear to you that in every raid I lead, Drusilla shall be on the left, and you on the right. And more than this, when you are strong, we will go fighting the monsters again".

Then, on another day, I visited her to find her adorning her face which alone proved her restored vigour. She smiled at me and I at her: "I rejoice to see you so well, sister".

"Ay, I feel as I always did. I wish to resume my duties. Yet Egeria says, not yet. But I feel so well".

"As I see. It seems that maids are the same whether on the surface or below it".

"Ay, beauty has to be looked to".

I took her hand and looked on her for a space. Then: "My dear Selene, was I wrong?".

Astonished, she stared: "Wrong, my Queen?".

"To have dragged you back from Inanna's arms to my selfish ones. I know you have gone through several painful operations to your dear head. Was I right, Selene? Would mine love have expressed itself more by letting you go to Inanna? This has troubled me much of late. Both you and Drusilla are gallant warriors, the bravest of maids. You were both prepared to be slain in mine interest.....".

Her arms, strong and smooth, reached up and drew me down to her in a kind of passion, and she kissed me desperately, as if her real wish was to consume me. Then she sank back with a sigh of happiness. "The love

of a Great Queen for her sister is a wonderful thing. Olympias, on that day when I saw you standing there in harness, with the diadem of queen-ship on your bascinet, you were the most magnificent of maids and I swore to myself that I would glory in being cut to pieces for you". A reluctant sob interrupted her words briefly. "Yet I tell you, no maid wants to die when her Queen honours her with the worship of her body. 'Tis true I was prepared to do so, for it is the greatest to which a maid may attain. But to live is my delight, seeing that it is your great happiness. So be not troubled, dearest Olympias". She was radiant and we clung together, making tactile love as only two maids may. Then she gave a tremulous laugh. "The late Queen, our blessed mother, once said that maids are made for pleasure and for war. It is true and I nightly thank Inanna in my prayers that your strong arm triumphed".

Then she held me at arms length and spoke in mock severity: "But my dearest Queen, you are keeping your Counsellor in ignorance of a wonderful thing. Looking in your eyes, it appears to me that my sweet Olympias is with child".

I had intended to tell her, but for some reason I was much embarrassed and looked down. She laughed at mine blush. "Such a great warrior, and such a delicate hue! Tell me 'tis true".

"'Tis true, Selene. At the great urging of the Council I have been implanted with the seed".

"It makes me jealous, Olympias".

"I am Queen, and must have an heir".

"Truly".

"And you too, Selene, if you wish it so greatly. You need a daughter to bear the axe after you".

"It has been my dream" she whispered, "yet the law is strict".

"You are of the royal house. The law exists not for you. Are you the Guardian of the Law and know not that?".

"Ay, so it has always been, and for good reasons. The perpetuation of the royal line is of primary importance. And for myself I accept with joy".

"'Tis well. And it has been agreed in Council that of each family, where a maid fell in battle, may be impregnated one member thereof; for the losses of the city have been grievous, and must be replaced. Thus, in a short time Themis will be awash with infant cries, thanks be to Inanna for it. Yet Drusilla will not, for she greatly fears another Morpasia, and says one heir is enough; yet she reserves her rights for the future".

And so it was that when mine days were accomplished, I brought forth a healthy daughter to reign after me, named Orithya. She is now a lusty, warlike maid of great beauty who warms my heart. Yet, as is our way, she was taken from me at the age of five years to be raised as a warrior, at which I did grieve, yet silently, knowing it was necessary. Selene (named after me) effected a change in her, albeit temporary, which much amused Drusilla. For Selene was, as we say, "rendered foolish" by her baby girl, nourishing her with the milk of her body, and spending countless hours sighing over her, and other maternal excesses. So I spent much time with Nerissa and Drusilla, for they both had firm and splendid breasts, with privy parts deep and lushly wet. And I often thought, what a crime it would have been if all I had of Drusilla were ashes in an urn in the Temple crypt.

Drusilla made love as she fought, full-bloodedly and with violence. We spoke our love between our gasps and moans of ecstasy. She drove me to distraction, making me cry out and beg her for mercy. Whereat she would

laugh in that husky way she has in bed, when in the throes of passion: "Faith, my sister, no maid could wrest that wail from you with an axe! Yet I can lay you low. How comes it?". And since there was no answer I could usefully make to the question, she would laugh again, and demolish me very sweetly.

Now, the day came when on the morrow when Selene left her sick bed and on that day I visited her and looked on her, marvelling at her good health. "Of a surety, sister, you look better than on that day I found you in your blood".

I saw her think on that day with a mixture of wistfulness and pride. "Ay, when I went down under Morpasia's mace I never thought to rise again. I mind it well, even though I was much stricken. I remember the nausea as I was struck, and I saw my enemy through a haze. I knew not what I did, except that I fell and could not rise. And when a warrior is so, she is finished, as I knew well". She took mine hand in her firm grip, and smiled: "Yet it was a great fight, and one I enjoyed greatly. Although I grieve for the other maids who fell around me. They were brave warriors".

"Indeed they were".

"They fought stubbornly for we had all sworn to fight until death claimed us. For we knew well we had to slay as many as we could for your dear sake. And Morpasia had cause to remember us, I think. They say I was the only one to survive".

"Thanks be to Inanna! And your fine harness".

"Doubtless. The fruits of high rank, Olympias. And the love of a Queen". I knew not what to say, so she went on: "Our losses were great? They would not tell me, whilst I was ill, saying it was a matter for the Queen".

"Our losses were indeed great, Selene. And I marvel you have not asked before.....".

"I was afraid to".

".....Hardly one house in the city escaped loss. Mothers and daughters fell indiscriminately. During the fight I felt nothing. Yet my heart near broke when, the day ours, I looked on the carnage".

"I blame you not. Yet it had to be done, and not one maid grudged her life. Our lives belong to Inanna, Themis and the Queen. To lay them down in such a cause is glory indeed".

"I know it well. Yet three noble families were totally extinguished, gloriously it must be admitted, yet so terribly. Mothers and daughters lay in a unity of death. Yet they went to the Queen of Heaven with a high heart".

"What decisions have been made?".

"I have advanced three families of the lesser nobility to the higher, and likewise three families of ordinary maids to nobility to supply the gap".

"'Tis well," Selene said softly, "you are a great Queen. And they did see fit to tell me of your harshness with the enemy dead, and with the bitch Morpasia, even though she was our sister".

"'Twas well done?".

"Supremely well done. All maids honour you for it".

"And for Calindra's sake I made her surviving daughter, Iras, Daughter of the Palace. So you have a new sister. For that family has rendered great service to the royal house. Charmion fell and even Iras lay on the ground with honourable wounds. I had marked her well, always in the

thick of the fighting, heeding not the blows that rained down on her body armour".

"Ay, she is a fearless maid, as indeed was Charmion. It pleases me to know that one of that noble stem survives. I shall welcome her to my arms when we meet".

We smiled on each other for a long time. Then she murmured: "I well call to mind the day I brought you down from the surface. I little thought then what a great Queen you would be. Do you ever think about the upper world?".

"But rarely. 'Tis as a bad dream. There I was in misery, here I have the company of gallant maids around me. How could I hunger for a patriarchal society, when I am Amazon. Believe it, Selene".

"Why, I do, Olympias, for I know you so well. And they tell me that on the surface, maids are not as we are?".

"Nay, they subjugate themselves to men".

"Why, in the name of Inanna!?".

"Even as we are bred up to fight, so they are bred up to submit to men's gross desires".

"'Tis pitiable".

"So I think. Yet the maids of the Eastern Confederation submitted to the Scythian men as I read in the chronicles".

"A matter of scandal that maids should be reduced to such straits".

"Ay" I smiled, "we would plunge our daggers into our bodies before we would do so".

"That is the way it would be. But are they fools?".

"Nay, just conditioned to servitude".

"Fools therefore".

"So it would seem".

"Are they happy?".

I shrugged. "But rarely. They expect no more. They are frequently beaten, often raped, sometimes murdered. Men are king; they are the hunters, the predators".

"Truly it seems that the patriarchals have learned little".

"The patriarchals have learned nothing".

This subject arose every so often in our conversations, for Selene was always much astonished at surface ways. One thing that amazed her was that you place your dead below the ground. In the very early days we too used this method of disposal, or the funeral pyre, as you yourself used sometimes after a battle. Although from the plethora of burial pits on the surface it would appear that you were always much addicted to burial. As you have seen, since a certain time we have had unlimited power to cremate a body. Indeed, the restrictions of our site would not permit us taking your course, even if we desired it. The preservation of the human body has never formed part of our religion as it has with yours. Our cousins, the Egyptians, likewise had a fetish about this, making very sophisticated arrangements for body preservation. In Western nations cruder methods were adopted such as immersing the body in brine or harts-horn. This appears strange to us, as if the spirit had anything to do with the residual husk. Once the spirit is out of the body, what is left is of no value; yet it is well understood that you seem to need to identify a spot where your feelings of loss may be located. Selene says this indicates immaturity; yet I, having spent some time among you, am

more prone to sympathise with your feelings. Although overgrown and dis-used graveyards on the surface are the inevitable result of such a practice.

Another thing at which she marvels greatly is your attitude to life. Very early in our association she lectured me on this, saying: "The surface maintains the fiction that life is sacrosanct. This is not so; life is a gift of Inanna. On the surface they would consider that we are a warlike, even a cruel people. By their standards we are, and a quarrelsome, doubtless. Yet we are a warrior people and look at things differently. Everyone, apart from plebeians, carry daggers for the defence of our honour against some other maid who maligns us. So it has always been. On the surface it is said that each person is, in some way, responsible for the other. How foolish! And they have many laws, more than is healthy, and people to enforce them. In our society each maid is responsible for herself alone, and if she has to slay another, she does so and looks not back. If a maid fails to parry your thrust and is slain, you carry around no guilt, such as their patriarchal religion places on them. She is just thought of as a fool to have failed to slay you!". It is true; in our society is excitement in combat.

It now seems to us - for we monitor your doings, having a department of state that does nothing else but that - that your society is now moving towards this concept. Your world is becoming more violent, and to protect themselves maids are learning all manner of techniques, and even carrying concealed weapons, even though this is much against your laws. This seems to us a very healthy situation, to make each maid reliant on herself to pluck her life from the fire. For certainly your paid enforcers of the law are never there when they are really needed (yet being intrusively present when they are not) and self-reliance a much better buckler. Thus we feel and have always felt, and so live.

So, on the following day Selene returned to us, and we were together again, and so remain to this day. Yet is there more to tell.

Drusilla, when she saw Selene and I, nursing our daughters, could no longer resist the urgings of her body and likewise in time she brought forth a fine little maid, who she has called Cleone. Thus the Palace rings to laughter and music, and girlish sounds, whereas, had Morpasia triumphed, it might have rung to other things. And even though it was many years ago, as I sit in mine cabinet, I still sometimes think of those fine maids who dropped at mine feet on that dread day.

Yet I had one more tragedy to face. It was the loss of my comrade Nerissa, much too soon, for by our standards she was quite young. It was in your year 1958, in our month of Payni. Because it grieves me yet, I will spend not too much time on it, yet it was a noble death, of great self-sacrifice, for the Queen she had loved.

We had gone far south, beyond the great river that runs athwart this land, seeking a matriarchal tribe of which our traditions spoke. I do now believe in them, but at the time I did not. It was several days march through subterranea and for this reason we took a food wagon drawn by plebeian maids. We came, on our way, to a narrow valley and passing through it we thought we heard a noise far above our heads. We stopped to listen, and it sounded much like machinery. Selene said: "It must be coal mining activity by surface men". And so it was indeed.

We went on our way, through more tunnels until we reached a cavern in which we surprised a tribe of primitive women, greatly wild and savage in combat. Yet after a merry fight, we left some dead, but most we captured and so turned for home, having by this token replenished the ranks of the gladiatrices. Thus we came again to the same narrow valley.

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I knew not what it was; yet Nerissa, much quicker, understood well. "Flee, flee" she shrieked, "'tis a rock fall. Save the Queen!". She took me bodily and threw me into the arms of Drusilla and Selene who dragged me away, threw me to the ground and covered me with their bodies. I had a last view of Nerissa standing erect, shouting orders to the other maids. I screamed at her to flee. "Too late.....my love" she cried and she disappeared under an avalanche of rock. I wept.

When the roaring ceased we lay on the ground, all of us covered with rock and dust; when we could see again we hauled ourselves to our feet. Of Nerissa there was no sign and no hope of reaching her. Yet I would have tried but for Selene and Drusilla who held me back by force. "Nay, nay, Olympias" Drusilla said softly. "There is naught to be done. The maid died that you might live.....glory in her memory and grieve not. Let us on, for you have the maids to protect. Leave we Nerissa to her rest".

"Think you she is with Inanna?" I sobbed.

"Never doubt it" Selene said softly. "Where else would such a brave warrior be?".

And so it had to be. Only one of our maids had a broken arm, struck by a great rock; yet because of her armour saved from further injury. Two of the prisoners, and one of our plebeian maids, lacking armour, had been struck dead by rocks; these we left where they had fallen. For the rest of us we hastily went on our way, much battered indeed, but alive.

Yet I still grieved, and seeing it, Drusilla (with what, in her, passed for compassion) gently gave me the philosophy of a born warrior: "Come now, Olympias. One hole is much like another". I knew she was right of course but for me Nerissa was something very special; and Selene, who likewise loved me, placed her gauntleted hand in mine and squeezed, the metal rasping against mine own gauntlet. Yet I was touched by her silent understanding.

Back in Themis I took mine condolences to Nerissa's sister, for her mother was long dead, and her daughter too young to understand her mother's absence; and from her I purchased, with gold, Corinna's harness, which, as you will recall, I had granted to Nerissa after the battle with Morpasia as a mark of mine signal favour. Nerissa had never worn it, for it was too lovely a piece of work to adventure in combat, or so we both felt. She had greased it and it was displayed in her villa for all maids to admire.

Now, we have each year in Themis a day-long celebration of the victory of Olympias over Morpasia, and on this day no servile work is done. It is a public holiday. And on this one day in the year I wear Corinna's harness, and am a resplendent figure in blue and gold. Forgive me, for I am a maid, with a maid's vanity! I now have a similar harness of mine own, yet because this was worn by the noble Corinna on that dread day, it means much to all of us. And thus am I proud to wear it.

Our celebrations take the form of a parade through the streets, rose petals being strewn in our path all the way. This culminates in a melee in the Forum, between sixty maids - thirty on each side - to commemorate mine slaying of Morpasia on that very spot. It is a brave scene, and a colourful, for I sit on mine throne at the top of the Palace steps in blue and gold metal, and surrounding me in their golden harnesses are mine sisters and all the nobility; and from there we watch the sixty silver-armoured maids in contention. And all around are the cheering people in their coloured stolas. It is a scene I wish you could see, yet you must imagine it.

On the surface I believe that melees degenerated into combats with blunt weapons. It is not so with us, for we are a fearless people, and would think scorn on a fight with blunted weapons. So it inevitably follows

that each year there are two or three fatalities. We think little of this for to us death in combat is a desirable end for a warrior. Yet despite the admitted risks, we could fill a good six melees with the number of applicants to participate. Such is the clamour for places that I have to choose them by random selection.

My worst moment came in the year 1961 when mine daughter, Orythia, being twenty-one years of age, and truly her mother's daughter, wanted much to participate. Like any natural mother I was concerned, and warned her gravely of what might be, yet she, being valorous, yearned for it. And Drusilla gave a lazy laugh and reminded me of what I did when I was her age. Whereat I, biting mine lip in vexation, had perforce to allow it, much to Orythia's delight.

I have to admit that mine daughter fought bravely in the melee, which made me, though worried for her, mighty proud. Then, on a sudden, she took a mighty blow on her bascinet and staggered, as I could see, much stricken. Then another maid, stepping to the side, smote her strongly in her middle; whereat Orythia bent double, much hurt. And turning, stumbled away. Then the maid who had first smitten her, leapt after her and struck her fiercely on the back of her helmet; whereat the fruit of mine belly fell, and moved not.

While the melee yet ranged to and fro over the Forum I could do nothing. Yet when it ended, and but twelve maids remained on their feet, to the cheers of the crowd, I had mine dear daughter carried to her chamber and there stripped of her armour. Her face was white, drained of all colour, and she spoke not. Carried to the surgeons she lay in what they call a coma for seven of our days, at which time I did not leave her bedside, and slept not. Then on the eighth day her eyes opened; and seeing me she smiled weakly: "Faith, mother" she whispered, "that was a famous fight, was it not? And your Orythia dishonoured not her mother". With that she sank into a peaceful sleep and from that moment started to mend, for we are a hardy people, used to hard knocks. And within a month, by the grace of Inanna, she was back at mine side, a damsel of great beauty and gallantry. Yet of her comrades on that day, two would never wield sword again.

Such is life in Themis; and such is the story of Olympias II and her wicked sister, Morpasia. Themis is a very old city, but young in its people. The losses of the great battle have been replaced, the sorrow eased by the passage of time. Olympias and her sisters are but on the threshold of middle age as we understand the term, our lifespan being double your own by reason of the purity of our environment and our greatly advanced medical and surgical skills.

Yet, having lived amongst you (albeit against mine will) I am not sanguine enough to believe that you will think I speak the truth, yet I do, for I have no reason to lie.

And so I bid you Farewell.